

FROM STRIVING TO SURRENDER:
A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MINISTER'S JOURNEY FROM BURN-OUT
TO A SUSTAINING AND SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY

A Practical Research Project

Presented to the Faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Ministry

by

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This professional project completed by

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ABSTRACT

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This project uses autoethnography to explore one Unitarian Universalist Minister's journey toward a sustaining and sustainable practice of ministry in the aftermath of burn-out, and to analyze the impact of the ministry and educational contexts that contributed to both the burn-out and the reinvigoration of her ministry.

The author began by identifying three problems she believed had contributed to her burnout, which were within her control: 1) She wasn't giving adequate time to the spiritual practices that connected her with the Spirit of Life and Love, and nourished and sustained her; 2) She lacked a theology/cosmology that could both sustain her in difficult times and speak to the needs of the theologically diverse (and sometimes theologically averse) congregations she serves; and 3) In her eagerness to lead and to support the congregations' developmental work during interim periods, she had neglected her own creativity, most notably the singing and songwriting that had been central to her call to ministry.

She designed an ambitious plan with a framework of disciplined spiritual practice, daily and weekly reflective journaling, and dedicated time for songwriting: She was making good progress when, a few months into the project, she experienced a period of debilitating illness that ultimately played a crucial role in her developing a sustaining and sustainable practice of ministry.

The author creates a thick narrative of transformation through layered accounts of this developmental process. Contemporaneous journal excerpts exploring life experiences, dreams, insights during meditation, and responses to readings are woven through the narrative and invite the reader into the inner life of the author/researcher. Crucial life experiences are revisited through the lens of the author's emerging embrace of Process Theology in a term paper written mid-way through the project. A sermon preached once the author was a year into a new ministry integrates the learning from the project and demonstrates its value to others struggling with a variety of life challenges. Finally, new songs composed by the author in the course of the project, and older compositions that are salient to the current project demonstrate the role of creativity in the author's process of healing and renewal, and are offered freely for use by others.

Though grounded in the author's personal experience, this autoethnography stretches beyond that experience to give both insiders and outsiders an understanding of the contexts in which the author's project, and development, unfolded: Unitarian Universalism (UU); Unitarian Universalist (UU) ministry, the specialization of UU Interim Ministry practiced in three different congregations; and Claremont School of Theology's Doctor of Ministry (D. Min.) program in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership.

The project bears witness to the importance and possibility of spiritual renewal for clergy experiencing (or seeking to avoid) burn-out. It offers inspiration, hope and resources for the journey, and illustrates the potential value of an integrative D. Min. program as part of the process of renewal.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Congregational Consultant Susan Beaumont for her articulation of a threefold spiritual shift in leaders who learn to lead with presence, from their true selves, in liminal seasons: “From knowing to unknowing; from advocating to attending; and from striving to surrender”, the last of which I have borrowed for the title of this project.¹

Frank Rogers, Jr. notes, “Spiritual renewal is at its heart about compassion.”² This project is, at its heart, about spiritual renewal, so I wish to thank Frank Rogers for developing and generously sharing The Compassion Practice that is at the heart of Claremont School of Theology’s D. Min. in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership. Furthermore, I wish to thank Claremont School of Theology, Frank Rogers, and Andrew Dreitcer for offering this groundbreaking and much-needed D. Min. program that enables ministers not just to learn more about the practice of ministry, but to nurture their ministerial hearts and souls through the development of compassion.

Thank you also to Bruce Epperly, who models and embodies Process Theology even as he teaches it.

Karen Dalton provided much needed encouragement as I shaped and reshaped my D. Min. project multiple times.

Nicholas Grier, my Project Advisor, asked astute questions that helped me “own” the direction of this project, and pulled me back from the brink when I was prepared to stop short of

¹ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2019), ix.

² Frank Rogers, “Spiritual Renewal for Engaged Compassion,” lecture (Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, January 14, 2019).

its completion. His teaching and gentle guidance have shaped not only this project, but me, as well.

My colleague, Helen Carroll, will see her influence in these pages. I am grateful for her wisdom, support, and interventions in my ministry, and for that of other colleagues who have offered encouragement and support through this project.

Finally, I express my utmost gratitude and love to my spouse, Anders, who supports, companions, and champions me in my seeking and in my ministry.

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I Say, “Yes.”

You say “God,” and I say “Oh, god! Not that again!”

Not that old tired word
for something moving, dancing,
breath of life,
animation!
spirit of love,
music!

Say something else,
I plead,
for I long to believe what I know:
I am held, and known and loved.

When I ask “What am I not seeing?” an answer comes.

A dream, an image, a word or two,
an earworm lifts the veil,
makes way out of no way:
“the best for this impasse.”

You say, “God,” and I say
“Oh, you mean the thing that beckons,
the quiet, persistent urge,
delight in the trees,
blossoms on tomato plants,
rain?”

(Not that old tired word
stopping ears, shutting eyes
closing minds?)

Not that one hijacked,
wielded by dealers of death?)

You say, “God,” and I say,
“Yes!”

Emily Melcher

Introduction

This is first and foremost a story of my journey from burnout in ministry to spiritual renewal and the development of a sustaining and sustainable practice of ministry. I say that it's "a" story because I am keenly aware, and these pages will demonstrate, that there are multiple ways to tell a story. The social location and aims of the storyteller and the context(s) in which the story unfolds; the storyteller's proximity to events described or recounted; the impact of new experiences and learning on old stories; and the author's choice of genre(s) all impact the telling. Furthermore, because human development is life-long, it would be folly to suggest that this particular telling is either definitive or final, though I do hope it will be compelling and inspiring, and have the ring of truth.

My personal journey of psychological and spiritual development is the primary focus of this project and the driver of the narrative, but the story I tell is more accurately called autoethnography than autobiography, for it also seeks to illuminate the formative (and sometimes deformative) contexts in which this developmental process took place: Unitarian Universalism (UU); Unitarian Universalist (UU) ministry, the specialization of UU Interim Ministry practiced in three different congregations; and Claremont School of Theology's Doctor of Ministry (D. Min.) program in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership.

My hope is to take you along with me on this journey, to invite you into its unfolding, showing rather than telling you about it. Therefore, rather than frontloading the narrative with separate chapters on the theories, theologies, and methodologies that inform this work, I introduce them as part of the narrative.

I have attempted to create what autoethnography calls “layered accounts”. My own experience is revealed through contemporaneous journal entries that give an in-the-moment glimpse of my inner life, my emerging theology, and my experiences with Frank Rogers Jr’s Compassion Practice, which has been my primary spiritual practice during the three plus years of this project. The journal entries include quotes from, and references to, readings that companioned me throughout the journey, shaping my thinking and my experience.

The inclusion of a complete term paper on Process Theology in Chapter 3 captures a pivotal turn toward the development of a sustaining, life-giving theology, recasting previous experiences and setting the stage for the development to come. Creative expression, in the form of new songs and poetry that emerged in support of my developmental process, opens a window into my healing process. Rounding out the story is a sermon that integrates and passes along some of what I’ve learned through this project.

Every developmental process invites the retelling and integration of old stories. Therefore, there are several stories that appear more than once, renewed and recast in the retelling. For example, my former therapist, Fred, who played a crucial role in my healing from depression two decades ago, appears frequently in these pages, showing how my understanding of his role in my life shifted in and through this D. Min. project, from the source of compassion to a conduit of a sacred source of compassion.

I hope that this story will communicate something of value to those experiencing (or seeking to avoid) burnout, and those who seek a spiritual grounding or wish to develop practices to support a deep, lived experience of the sacred source of compassion at the heart of the cosmos, and nurture their capacity to extend compassion to themselves and others.

In Chapter 1, “Thirsting”, I share how I came to realize I was burned out in ministry. I identify my social location and describe how it enabled me to take time away from ministry for spiritual renewal.

In Chapter 2, “Seeking”, I briefly discuss clergy burn-out. I then circle back to my introduction to Unitarian Universalism and my initial call to ministry in order to identify the life circumstances in which my call emerged and was nourished, as a means of identifying what I believed was missing in my practice of ministry. I analyze the impact of Unitarian Universalism’s theological diversity, and introduce concepts from change theory that shed light on the experience of liminality in my own life and in the congregations I’ve served. I reflect on my choice of Claremont School of Theology’s D. Min. in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership as a pathway to spiritual renewal, and discuss why autoethnography emerged as a methodology for this project.

In Chapter 3, “Striving”, I begin by naming the critical insight that practicing interim ministry for six years as if it were “congregational ministry plus” led to my burn-out, then describe the ambitious design of my D. Min. project.

In Chapter 4, “Engaging”, I begin by describing Frank Rogers, Jr.’s Compassion Practice, which is at the heart of this D. Min. program. I explore the role of journaling in integrating the various parts of my project, then share journal entries from early in the project that reveal both where I was stuck, and where my deepest hunger was leading me. Coursework in Process Theology was of critical importance to one of the project’s goals: embracing a theology that could sustain me in difficult times and speak to the needs of the theologically diverse (and sometimes theologically averse) Unitarian Universalist congregations I serve. A term paper written for one of those courses gave me an opportunity to reflect deeply on Process Theology,

revisit important experiences in my life, and reinterpret a film that has long been a metaphor for my ministry. The paper, “Adventures with the Spirit of Life,” is included in its entirety within Chapter 4. It is followed by journal entries from the ensuing months, where meditations, dreams, study, and reflection reveal the ongoing nature of my path toward an integrated theology and demonstrate how they work synergistically to bring it about.

In Chapter 5, “Falling”, I explore how a sudden and debilitating illness in the midst of my project plunged me into a liminal space. I draw on the work of spiritual leaders who describe the nature of true and false or ego-selves to describe how I was forced to relinquish my ego-self and the striving that went with it before I could find a new direction. I draw, again, on journals that include my thinking, reflections on my reading, and insights from the Compassion Practice to explore my time in the liminal space, and the signs that pointed to my emergence from it.

In Chapter 6, “Emerging,” journal entries show an inner peace and the integration of theology and spiritual experience in my life.

In Chapter 7, “Ministering Anew”, I assess the outcome of my project on the development of a sustaining and sustainable practice of ministry as I am experiencing it in my current ministry context. I suggest future directions for the work of this project.

I close the project with an Epilog in the form of a sermon written a year or so into my current ministry, as I was nearing the end of my D. Min Program. It introduces the Compassion Practice as one path to addressing the myriad difficulties people face in their lifetimes, through the lens of one of my experiences. I include it here in order to show how one of the central struggles that shaped this project has become a gift for my ministry to others.

Chapter 1: Thirsting

Different Plans

“I don’t know how long I can do this, he said. I think the universe has different plans for me & we sat there in silence & I thought to myself that this is the thing we all come to & this is the thing we all fight & if we are lucky enough to lose, our lives become beautiful with mystery again & I sat there silent because that is not something that can be said.”³

“I know what’s going on,” I heard that voice inside me say. “I’m dying.”

It was the same voice I’d heard years before, calling me to ministry; the same voice I’d heard at pivotal moments when I needed direction and had come to the end of my intellect’s capacity to deliver me. It spoke to me in first person, as it tends to when I haven’t yet relinquished my illusion of control.

“I’d like to be a minister in this church,” it had said, launching me on my path toward ministry.

Now it was telling me I was dying.

I had just completed my fifth year of interim ministry with Unitarian Universalist congregations, and had been physically ill with chronic hives, dizziness, and tenacious bronchitis for several months. I was participating in a 5-day advanced training for interim ministers in sunny Los Angeles, where each morning before our training, I walked several times around a beautiful lake filled with blossoming water lilies in Echo Park. The warmth and beauty of the place stood in stark juxtaposition to how I felt.

³ Brian Andreas, "Different Plans," *Traveling Light: Stories and Drawings For a Quiet Mind* (Decorah, IA: StoryPeople, 2003), Kindle Loc. 63.

“I know what’s happening here. I’m dying.”

I shared this experience with a friend and colleague who was also participating in the training. With the perspective of many more years in ministry than my five, she responded: “Yep. You’re like a comet burning out.”

My wake-up call came, as wake-up calls often must to one who lives in her head as much as I do, in the most frightening of messages: “I’m dying.”

That got my attention.

I didn’t go into ministry to die. I went into ministry to participate in nurturing Life and lives, to foster healing and wholeness for others in religious communities as it had been fostered in me, and thereby to influence positive change in the world. Indeed, I believe it’s fair to say that I was accomplishing those things in ministry.

But ministry was killing me, if not literally, at least in a psycho-spiritual sense.

I didn’t want to leave ministry, and I recognized that the alternative was to learn to practice ministry differently. I didn’t have a vision for what it would mean for me to develop a sustainable practice of ministry, but I knew that I needed to step away for a time to heal and to have the space for that awareness to unfold within me.

It is crucial that I name at the outset the privilege that has enabled me to take this journey in this particular way. It’s not uncommon for Unitarian Universalist candidates for ministry to come out of seminary carrying up to \$100,000 in debt. As a white, upper-middle class woman married for decades to a white man with professional work, I was fortunate to be able to pay as I went for both my M. Div. and my D. Min, without working concurrently. It must be acknowledged that the luxury of taking time away from active ministry to tend to one’s soul is

not broadly accessible. Most of my colleagues who undertake a D. Min. program serve concurrently in full-time ministry settings.

Because of my particular social location, I was able to take two years off for a process that ultimately took upwards of three years and a lot of digging.

Chapter 2: Seeking

The Plumber

“the plumber was digging around in the pipes & he saw something shine in the muck & it turned out to be the soul of the last tenant. He gave it to me & I said I wonder how we can return it & he shrugged & said he found stuff like that all the time. You’d be amazed what people lose, he said...”⁴

It was abundantly clear to me that I had lost my soul in ministry. As Brian Andreas’s story suggests, I was not alone. “People lose stuff like that all the time.” The sheer volume of literature on the issue of burn-out in ministry (and other helping professions) suggests that many a clergy soul might be found in the pipes of congregations, if anyone went looking for it.

Indeed, it is well-known in Unitarian Universalist circles that that many UU clergy leave ministry in their first five years of practice. Many of those clergy, myself included, are skillful and gifted ministers, and our ministry is needed in our congregations and the world. In addition, in Unitarian Universalist congregations, an estimated 20 to 25% of settled ministries end in negotiated resignations, which clearly indicates the need for practices of ministry that are both sustaining and sustainable. Thus, when I experienced burn-out at the five-year mark, I recognized the imperative of learning to practice ministry in more sustaining and sustainable ways. While the ways I have found are particular to me, they bear witness to the possibility of meeting a widespread need in ministry. If I have done my job well, they will offer inspiration to others who have lost their souls in ministry, and long to find them again.

⁴ Brian Andreas, "The Plumber," *Mostly True: Collected Writings & Drawings of Brian Andreas* (Decorah, IA: StoryPeople, 1993), unnumbered.

Looking for a lost soul is easier said than done. In order to find what I'd lost, I began by retracing the journey that had ended in burn-out.

Circling Back

My first inkling of a call to ministry had come when I was in my mid-30s and suffering from a depression. I had been in therapy for about a year when I recognized my need to be part of a church again, after nearly 20 years of counting myself among the “spiritual but not religious.” I’d been raised in the Episcopal Church, and had also occasionally worshipped with a small Pentecostal group as a teen, and those experiences had shaped me in significant ways, perhaps most notably by giving me a theological explanation for the powerful and ineffable experience that the Unitarian Universalist tradition in which I minister calls “the transcending mystery and wonder”. That transcendent experience, which my childhood tradition called “the holy spirit” was not the sole purview of church; indeed, I was as likely to experience it outside of church as within it.

I had left the church altogether at age 18, in the aftermath of revelations that our rector had sexually abused boys in the congregation while performing a sacrament known as the Laying on of Hands for Spiritual Healing. In leaving the church, I also rejected its theological framework, but not the experience it named.

When I recognized my need to be part of a church again, I knew I wasn’t seeking the church or the theology of my childhood, but the embodied experience of the holy that I’d so often experienced in worship. I sought and found that experience at the First Unitarian Society in Madison, Wisconsin. There were other things that appealed to me: the intellectual sermon; the moving music; the congregation’s “Bond of Union” which recognized Jesus as a prophet to be

emulated, rather than as “the son of God”; and the Purposes and Principles of Unitarian Universalism, which were printed on the order of service:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life;
Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.
Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.
Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.⁵

I felt as if I had come home. Here was a religion based not on dogma or creed, and centered not on a God in whom I no longer believed, but on human values, experience, and

⁵ This statement, with the exception of the sixth source (“Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature”) was adopted by the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and codified in the UUA bylaws in 1985, with only one dissenting vote. The sixth source was added in 1995. It is incorporated into the bylaws of many UU congregations, and is frequently included in Orders of Service (worship bulletins), preached about, and taught in our religious education programs, and is therefore very familiar to most Unitarian Universalists.

potential. It touched my heart and soul without (as I said in the months and years following) “requiring me to check my brain at the door”.

As I left the sanctuary after that first service, I heard a tiny voice inside me say: “I’d like to be a minister in this church.”

I certainly didn’t rush into ministry; indeed, I spent five years exploring not only Unitarian Universalism, but my call, and my own willingness to respond, before I entered seminary. Those five years were a healing, soul-tending time for me, and would not be rushed. My therapist was a steady embodiment of compassion whose modeling enabled me to develop self-compassion for the first time in my life. Having received compassion in abundance, I now found myself offering it to those around me, and I longed to do so ever more deeply and fully. I believed I could do that in ministry.

Singing had always been an important way for me to connect with the spirit of life and love, with myself, and with others. Now, at the suggestion of my therapist, I began to use songwriting as a therapeutic tool. When I was struggling with something, I’d take a walk, and simply ask aloud, “What am I not seeing?” In time, I’d begin to hear something in the back of my mind – a few words, a melody -- that embodied the very understanding I needed to move forward when I was stuck. The songs I wrote during those years both furthered and embodied the transformative process in which I was engaged, and in sharing those songs, I discovered they held healing power for others as well. My songwriting functioned as my singing always had: as an embodied prayer, connecting me with the spirit of life and love, with intuition and self-compassion, and ultimately with others as well. Over the years, the songs that came to me during that period have continued to reveal more to me about myself, about my relationship to the spirit of life and love, and about my relationships to other human beings.

During those years, I also journaled extensively, using a variety of techniques. Like the prayer “What am I not seeing?”, journaling regularly allowed me to drop down out of my head and attend to other ways of knowing: the voice of intuition; the needs of my body; dialog between various parts of myself; active imagination; and dream work, all in service of healing and wholeness.

During that same period, I engaged deeply in my new congregation. Being part of that community was a grace-filled experience that taught me the power of compassionate spiritual community. It was an essential part of my psychological healing and spiritual deepening. As I came to take on leadership roles in the congregation, my call to ministry deepened, and was increasingly affirmed by members of the congregation and its ministers, who offered me opportunities to share my music, to develop and teach religious education classes, to facilitate retreats, and, occasionally, to preach.

When my spouse and I sold our beloved home in Wisconsin and moved to Boston for me to enter seminary, I was overwhelmed with a mixture of excitement, grief, and fear.

A decade later, with five years of ministry behind me, I heard that little voice telling me I was dying.

At that point, I was half-way through a two-year contract with the congregation I was serving. I didn’t want to break the contract, so I promised myself I’d take a gap year at the end of the contract period. In the meantime, I would explore practicing ministry in ways that aligned more closely with my essential gifts, prioritizing the creativity that flourished in my sermon-writing, preaching, and especially in songwriting when and if I gave it adequate space and time. I shared this commitment with congregational leaders, who supported me in shifting my priorities, and I began to heal during the ensuing months. Only in retrospect have I been able to discern that

I didn't so much shift my priorities during the final six months of that ministry, as simply add to them. Nevertheless, doing more of the creative work I loved was nourishing enough that I briefly second-guessed my decision to take a gap year. But only briefly.

I realized that I couldn't go on practicing ministry as I had been. The truth is that I didn't know if I'd ever return to the work of interim ministry. I knew only that I needed to draw my energy inward for a time of healing, reflection and discernment. I knew that I still needed clarity about what would make ministry sustaining and sustainable for me in the long run and embarked on the gap year I'd promised myself.

The Liminal Space

As an Accredited Interim Minister, I was well familiar with change theory, and understood that I was entering into what change theorists variously call the neutral zone or liminal space.⁶

Change management consultant and author William Bridges differentiates between change (the event that causes things to be different) and transition, which he describes as a three-stage process that begins with a change (an ending or precipitating event); includes a time in “the neutral zone”; and culminates in a new beginning.⁷

Bridges describes “the neutral zone” in this reflection on life stage transitions in traditional societies:

⁶ “Accredited Interim Minister” is a designation granted to a UU Minister who has completed advanced training in interim ministry and served successfully in more than one congregation while being mentored by an Accredited Interim Minister.

⁷ William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 133.

In other times and places, the person in transition left the village and went into an unfamiliar stretch of forest or desert. There the person would remain for a time, removed from the old connections, bereft of the old identities, and stripped of the old reality. This was a time “between dreams” in which the fundamental chaos of the world’s beginnings welled up and obliterated all forms. It was a place without a name—an empty space in the world and the lifetime where a new sense of self could gestate.⁸

Susan Beaumont is a congregational consultant and author, whose religiously grounded theoretical perspective on liminality bears striking similarities to Bridges’ theory of transition:

All significant transitional experiences...follow a predictable three-part process. Something comes to an end. There is an in-between season marked by disorientation, disidentification, and disengagement. Finally, and often after a very long and painful struggle, something new emerges.

1. Separation: A period in which a person, group or social order is stripped of the identity and status that previously limited and defined.
2. Liminal Period: A disorienting period of non-structure or anti-structure that opens up new possibilities no longer based on old status or power hierarchies. New identities are explored, and new possibilities considered.
3. Reorientation: A reforming period in which the person, group, or social order adopts a new identity, is granted a new status, and designs new structures more appropriately suited to the emerging identity.⁹

Liminal spaces, when what worked before no longer works, and what has yet to be is still unknown, are occasioned by a variety of things, including depression; burn-out; physical illness; job loss; retirement; and life transitions such as coming of age, marriage, divorce, or death of a loved one.

⁸ Bridges, *Transitions*, 133.

⁹ Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*, 2-3.

Having come through the liminal space of depression in my 30's with a new direction and identity, I knew well the transformative potential it holds. Furthermore, as a Unitarian Universalist Accredited Interim Minister, I had specialized in serving with congregations in their liminal spaces between settled ministers. Thus, I knew both from personal experience and from leading congregations during their experiences of transition that the liminal space isn't something people readily embrace, for it is typically unfamiliar and frequently uncomfortable and disorienting. It may even be frightening and chaotic, which is why it's the most natural thing in the world for both individuals and organizations to try to circumvent it or move through it as quickly as possible. However, the necessary psychological adjustment that enables a new sense of identity to emerge suffers when we do. If we're able to stay in it, the liminal space can be a tremendously fertile and potentially transformative one that can ultimately lead to clarity, new direction, and new life.

I suspect that tension was at play when, a few months into my gap year, relaxed and rested by travel, I chose an experience with which I was already acquainted and well-practiced: more education.

Education's Promise

I had long anticipated that I would return to graduate school to earn a D. Min. Now I recalled a conversation with another colleague at the advanced interim minister's training. Karri Backer was a doctoral student at Claremont School of Theology (CST) who responded to me sharing my experience of burn-out and my recognition that I needed spiritual renewal by telling me what she knew of CST's new D. Min. in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership. The program she described sounded tailor-made for a minister who was

desperately in need of spiritual renewal herself, and also recognized the need for it in the congregations she served.

Certainly, the two are not unrelated. Unitarianism (the view that God is one) and Universalism (the view that a loving God will ultimately reconcile all people to Godself) were heretical theologies within Early Christianity, heresies for which people were put to death. In early New England, these theological heresies led to the split of Unitarians from the established Trinitarian churches, while Universalism's churches were established in their own right, rather than as a result of schisms in established churches. Both Unitarians and Universalists (who in 1961 joined to form Unitarian Universalism) have a several-hundred-year-old tradition of establishing no creedal test for membership. Over the years, we have welcomed into our congregations people with a wide variety of religious histories and theological understandings, as well as those who profess no theology and those who identify as atheists. We hold that revelation is not sealed; by which we mean that we seek truth wherever it may be found, rather than in a particular scripture. As a result, Unitarian Universalist congregations (and the ministers who serve them) are theologically diverse. Unfortunately, we are also not infrequently theologically averse!

In 1985, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations' Commission on Appraisal (a commission charged with studying in-depth and reporting back to the General Assembly on one aspect of Unitarian Universalism) completed their study of theological diversity within Unitarian Universalism. Their report, titled *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*,

recognized the breadth of our theological diversity, while acknowledging that we have significant difficulties actually engaging with one another theologically.¹⁰

Rather than inviting a robust, respectful pluralism, Unitarian Universalists have a de facto “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach to theology, which leaves many spiritually adrift.

This situation presents a particular challenge for clergy whose theologies and spiritual practices may not be salient, or even welcome, in the congregations they serve. In our congregational tradition, where congregations select and “call” their own ministers, a minister whose theological orientation isn’t broadly shared in the congregation they serve will find great difficulty preaching and teaching it. I suspect that this leads to the privatizing of UU ministers’ theologies and spiritual practices, which in turn leaves clergy leading with only a part of our souls. If the work of ministry leaves clergy too exhausted to deepen their own theologies, as is too often the case, our souls may, indeed, get lost in the pipes of the congregations we serve.

In my six years of ministry, I had used every metaphor I could find for talking about the first-named source of Unitarian Universalism, “that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” Some members of the congregations I served were prickly about religious language; some went so far as to reject it altogether. The impact on me of feeling as if I couldn’t minister from the center of my experience of the holy undoubtedly played a role in my burn-out.

Part of what I hoped to develop through Claremont School of Theology’s Doctoral Program in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership was a theology that would not only be life-giving for me personally and professionally, but would also “preach

¹⁰ Unitarian Universalist Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity: A Report* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005).

and teach” in UU congregations and in our Association of Congregations, thus making a modest contribution toward moving us beyond “don’t ask, don’t tell” toward greater spiritual grounding.

It seemed likely to me that learning more about spiritual practice could be an important part of that renewal, and I hoped that my course work would provide a structure for new learning, as well as the impetus to commit myself anew to regular spiritual practice. I applied and was accepted into the program and attended the first of three annual week-long intensive core courses a few months later.

I was surprised and confused when, on the first afternoon of my first class at CST, we were asked to identify the problem in the practice of ministry that would be the focus for our D. Min. projects.

The truth is, I was probably both naïve and under-informed about the nature of the D. Min. program. I had come into the program hungry for my own spiritual renewal and assumed that a focus would emerge through my course work. That’s not to say I hadn’t encountered problems in the practice of ministry, simply that I went to class that first day anticipating the beginning of an integrative healing process from which I would emerge renewed and, hopefully, better prepared to serve in future ministry positions without losing my soul or my life.

Now, on the first day of class, I was being asked to identify a discrete problem in the practice of ministry, for which I would design, carry out, and assess an intervention that was manageable in scope and could be written up in 50-80 pages. The project should contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the field of ministry and benefit ministry as a whole, despite the fact that it would, in all likelihood, sit it on a shelf, unread, for all time. I’m paraphrasing, of course, but this was the gist of the message I heard that first day of class.

Because it's in my nature or training – or more likely the perfectionism that is part and parcel of having been raised in white supremacy culture – to answer any question posed, I identified my desire to address the problem of spiritual hunger in our congregations. But I wasn't serving a congregation at the time, precisely because I was burned out and needed spiritual renewal myself.

The more I pursued that focus, the clearer it became to me that the critical problem I faced in the practice of ministry lay not in the congregations I served as a Unitarian Universalist Accredited Interim Minister, but in the way I understood and practiced ministry. What I realized was that if I were burned out, I certainly couldn't hope to foster spiritual renewal in the congregations I serve.

By the time I attended my second intensive core course a year into my D. Min. program, I had recognized that instead of designing an intervention for a congregation, I needed to intervene in my own practice of ministry.

This presented its own complications, for when the project requirements were introduced to us that first day of class, we'd been told that word "I" was acceptable only in the introductory chapter. Subsequent chapters must demonstrate appropriate academic objectivity. I had no idea how I would do that, since I was both the researcher, and the subject of my research. It would be months before I let go of that expectation, and came to believe that the academy might recognize, as had I, that my project must be rooted in and shared through my own experience, which suggested autobiography as a research methodology. As my writing proceeded, I recognized that analyzing the cultural contexts in which my burn-out and spiritual renewal took place would provide readers and me additional insight into my experiences, giving my story deeper truth and relevance to theirs. Autoethnography would allow me to do both.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography combines elements of autobiography (writing about the self) and ethnography (the study of cultures). It is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.”¹¹ While the purpose of analyzing and sharing my own developmental process is not, strictly speaking, to understand cultural experience, introducing cultural analysis into the study of my own experience provides relevant and useful information for both insiders and outsiders to the cultures in which my development took place, illuminating the ways in which those cultures contributed to my burn-out, my spiritual renewal, and other developmental needs of which I was unaware at the outset. Considering, in particular, the common values and beliefs of those cultures suggests explanations for my burn-out that go beyond Western psychology’s tradition of locating the source of problems in the individual, and reasons why my healing journey unfolded as it did.

My interpretations are subject to the limitations of my perception, and I have undoubtedly generalized more than what would be ideal for a research project. Nevertheless, those interpretations are grounded in a depth of personal engagement in those cultures and borne out not only by anecdotal evidence and my personal experience, but by study and personal communication that predates or falls outside the scope of this project. In other words, they give the narrative verisimilitude and contribute to an understanding of the particulars of those cultures, and the impact of those particulars not only on me, but on others as well.

¹¹ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, no. 12 (November 24, 2010): abstract, <https://doi.org/10.17169/FQS-12.1.1589>.

This methodology allowed me to both show and interrogate my own experience of a ubiquitous problem. Rather than simply recounting a narrative, the writing process itself helped me to integrate my history with new learning and experience, and furthered my understanding of my own experience, and that the cultures in which I am a participant, as well as those which are unlike my own.

From the outset, I was committed to the idea that my D. Min. project must do more than add to my own knowledge or to the body of knowledge about the practice of ministry; It must also serve a developmental need, integrate learning and experience, head and heart, and evoke and be shaped by my creativity.

My project design incorporated extensive reflective journaling on the process, which, together with writing I did in connection with my coursework, gives me quite a bit of contemporaneous material on which to draw in my reflection, interpretation and writing. Furthermore, in and through each of these processes (including the final write-up of the project) new layers of the story have emerged and contributed to both my own goals for the project, and to the depth and integrity of the narrative.

It is my hope that my D. Min. project will thereby be an inspiration to clergy who are themselves facing burn-out or find themselves in need of spiritual renewal, or needing to find ways to express their unique gifts in ministry, no matter where they find themselves in their careers.

I hope that this project will serve as a humble, honest, and inspiring example of a minister who has experienced burn-out and found her own path to a sustaining and sustainable practice of ministry, and perhaps evoke a longing in others for their own paths.

Perhaps my critique of the cultures in which ministry is practiced will suggest opportunities for others to develop their own practices of ministry toward greater satisfaction and sustainability. I also hope it will contribute to making those cultures healthier and more conducive to spiritual health and growth not only for ministers, but for laity as well.

I hope that clergy, music directors, and congregational song leaders will find the few new songs I have composed as part of this project meaningful and useful in their contexts.

Finally, I hope, through the witness of this project, to demonstrate that the academy, despite its traditional expectations of academic work, has a vital role to play in the spiritual renewal of clergy, especially in a program like CST's D. Min. in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership, and to encourage students to push the boundaries in the service of healthier practices of ministry.

Chapter 3: Striving

Day Job

“This holds all the stuff you haven’t been listening to & when the top comes off, it all starts to talk at once & it makes you glad you have a day job so you can get away for part of the time”¹²

Ministry Plus

At the advanced interim training where I’d heard the message that I was dying, conversation among my more senior colleagues had led me to another critical insight: For five years, I had been practicing interim ministry as if it were “congregational ministry plus”, by which I mean that I attempted to do all the work normally done by a minister in a congregational setting, *plus* providing support to congregational leadership in helping the congregation move through the developmental tasks of the interim ministry period: reviewing and coming to terms with their history; illuminating the congregation’s unique identity, strengths and challenges; navigating changes in leadership that accompany times of transition; strengthening their ties with the wider Unitarian Universalist faith; and discerning their future direction.

I had entered into interim ministry as a bright, eager, newly-credentialed and ordained minister, overflowing with enthusiasm and ideas and excited about putting them into practice. Immediately prior to the start of my first interim ministry position, I had participated in a 3-day training for new interim ministers, where I soaked up a tremendous amount of information of

¹² Brian Andreas, "Day Job," *Strange Dreams, Collected Stories & Drawings of Brian Andreas*, vol. 4 (Decorah, IA: StoryPeople, 1996).

particular value for the developmental tasks of interim ministry, which I added to what my training for ministry had taught me about congregational ministry.

Then I set out to accomplish all of it.

No wonder I was burned out!

Project Design

Eager and quick to learn, but paradoxically slow on the uptake, I continued my striving right into my D. Min. project. I began by identifying three problems that I believed contributed to my burnout, and were within my control: 1) I wasn't giving adequate time to the spiritual practices that connected me with the Spirit of Life and Love, and nourished and sustained me; 2) I lacked a theology/cosmology that could both sustain me in difficult times and speak to the needs of the theologically diverse (and sometimes theologically averse) congregations I serve; and 3) In my eagerness to lead and to support the congregations' developmental work during interim periods, I had neglected my own creativity, most notably the singing and songwriting that had been central to my call to ministry.

Driven by what I understood as a requirement to create a project that could be measured and assessed, and certainly by my own misdirected ego-need to treat spiritual renewal as goal to be achieved rather than a practice to be cultivated or gift to be received, I designed this ambitious plan with a framework of disciplined spiritual practice, daily and weekly reflective journaling, and dedicated time for songwriting:

I will dedicate a minimum of one and a half hours each morning to spiritual practices and journaling. I will begin each morning with a brief period of listening for which practice from Frank Rogers' *Compassion Practice* draws me. Then, before engaging that practice,

I will read and reflect upon three daily meditations: Story People’s “Story of the Day,”¹³ the Enneagram Institute’s “Enneathought for the Day,”¹⁴ and the daily meditation from Richard Rohr’s Center for Action and Contemplation,¹⁵ followed by one or more selections from Process and Faith’s lectionary commentaries,¹⁶ Richard Rohr’s *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent*,¹⁷ and meditations/prayers from Bruce Epperly’s *Praying with Process Theology*.¹⁸ In my journaling, I will reflect on the interplay of these readings, prayers and meditations, and how they speak to me and to my ministry. Then I will engage in the Compassion Practice I have selected earlier, and note in my journal any images, insights, emotions, and spiritual or religious experiences that arise during the meditation.

At least five times a week, I will devote a minimum of 45 minutes to singing and/or songwriting, and once a week, I will devote three uninterrupted hours to songwriting.

My journals, D. Min. course work, and songs related to my emerging theology and deepening spiritual practice will be used to trace the development of a sustaining theology, deepening spiritual practice, and emergence of a new body of songs.

Finally, I will reflect in writing weekly on the following questions:

- How is my theology supporting me?

¹³ Brian Andreas, *StoryPeople Story of the Day* (blog), *StoryPeople*.
<http://www.storypeople.com/stories/story-day/>.

¹⁴ *Enneathought for the Day* (subscription e-mail), *The Enneagram Institute*,
<https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/contact>.

¹⁵ Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations* (blog), *Center for Action and Contemplation*,
<https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/>.

¹⁶ *Lectionary Commentaries* (blog), *Process and Faith*, <https://processandfaith.org/lectionaries/>.

¹⁷ Richard Rohr, *Wondrous Encounters for Lent: Scripture for Lent* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2011).

¹⁸ Bruce Gordon Epperly, *Praying with Process Theology: Spiritual Practices for Personal and Planetary Healing* (Anoka, MN: River Lane Press, 2017).

- How is my theology informing and/or reflected in (i) life or (ii) my ministry?
- What role are the above-named spiritual practices playing in my life?
- Are additional spiritual practices emerging for me?
- How am I supporting spiritual practice in the life of the congregation?
- Where am I making room for singing and songwriting in my personal life?
- What role am I finding for my songs in my ministry?
- Where am I making room for creativity in my leadership of the congregation and/or fostering creativity in the congregation?
- How am I feeling (physically, emotionally, and spiritually?)

My responses to these questions will form the basis for assessing whether I have been successful in developing a sustaining and sustainable practice of ministry.¹⁹

I dove in with enthusiasm and delight. I found joy in learning and in bringing my new learning into dialog with my life experience and my experiences in ministry.

¹⁹ Emily Melcher, "Ministry from the Inside Out: A Unitarian Universalist Minister's Pursuit of a Sustaining and Sustainable Practice of Ministry" (D. Min. Practical Research Project Proposal), February 20, 2018.

Chapter 4: Engaging

Connection

“there came a moment in the middle of the song when we suddenly felt every heartbeat in the room & after that we never forgot we were part of something much bigger.”²⁰

The Compassion Practice: The Heart of Spiritual Renewal

As I’ve mentioned, I chose Claremont School of Theology’s D. Min. in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership because I was in desperate need of spiritual renewal myself. At the heart of the program is the Compassion Practice, developed by Frank Rogers Jr., Muriel Bernice Roberts Professor of Spiritual Formation and Narrative Pedagogy and Co-director of the Center for Engaged Compassion at Claremont School of Theology. “Spiritual Renewal,” according to Rogers, “is at its heart about compassion.”²¹

Only in retrospect would I fully understand how powerfully renewing the development of compassion would be for me, and how useful Rogers’s Compassion Practice would be to me in understanding it and connecting to it.

My introduction to the Compassion Practice came shortly before the first intensive course I attended, through Rogers’s books, *Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus*²² and *Practicing Compassion*.²³ Both books describe Rogers’s methodology for cultivating compassion; the difference between them is that *Compassion in Practice* uses an explicitly Christian lens, while

²⁰ Brian Andreas, "Connection," *Trusting Soul: Collected Stories & Drawings of Brian Andreas*, v. 6 (Decorah, IA: StoryPeople, 2000).

²¹ Rogers, “Spiritual Renewal for Engaged Compassion,” lecture.

²² Frank Rogers, *Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2016).

²³ Frank Rogers, *Practicing Compassion* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2015).

Practicing Compassion uses a secular frame, which enables it to speak to people of other faiths and those who aren't religious.

I read both versions of the Compassion Practice because I felt drawn to exploring the practice through both lenses: One of the Christianity I had dismissed as a young adult, and one in terms that would be comfortable and accessible to me and “work” with the theologically diverse and sometimes theologically averse Unitarian Universalist congregations I serve. Both books have been companions and guides in my practice of compassion ever since. Unless otherwise noted, I will be referencing *Practicing Compassion* in this project.

Rogers describes the Compassion Practice as “a radical path,” and its threefold invitation thus:

First, this path invites us to know, in the depths of our souls, a compassion that holds and heals us...

Second, the path of compassion invites us to be liberated from the internal turbulence that disconnects us from our compassionate core...

Third, the path of compassion invites us to feel genuine care toward others.²⁴

Through powerfully inspiring stories that describe people's experiences of turning toward compassion, descriptions of how the practice works, and a series of guided meditations, *Practicing Compassion* nurtures the practitioner's ability to connect ever more deeply with the sacred or universal source of compassion; cultivate compassion for self; and extend care and compassion to others.

Rogers uses the acronym “PULSE” to describe six dimensions at the heart of compassion:

“**P**aying attention (Contemplative awareness). Cultivate a non-judgmental, non-reactive awareness of whatever agitation is present within you/what the person is doing and how they are doing it.

²⁴ Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 12–14.

“Understanding empathically (Empathic care). Listen for and be moved by the suffering hidden within the cry of this agitation within you/their emotions or behaviors.

“Loving with connection. As you are moved by the suffering within you/another, extend care toward the need or wound that presents itself.

“Sensing the sacredness. Recognizing and savoring the cosmic expanse of compassion that holds and heals all wounds within you/suffering within another.

“Embodying new life. Notice the gifts and qualities of restored humanity that are being birthed within you/within another, and yearn for their flourishing.

“ACT From the PULSE of this compassionate connection, respond with tangible acts of healing, kindness, and care.”²⁵

The Compassion Practice cultivates in the practitioner grounding in a sacred or cosmic source of compassion that is ever available and ever sustaining. From this grounded place, it nurtures compassion for self through inviting awareness of and attention to those parts of the self that are “activated” in a difficult situation or relationship or in response to a difficult emotion. As these activated parts are welcomed and tended to with compassion, they reveal what Rogers calls our “FLAGS” – our **F**ears, **L**ongings, and **A**ching wounds, and the **G**ifts that feel stifled and long for expression. Those “FLAGS” are then held in universal compassion as well.

Recognizing that compassion for others cannot be forced or manufactured, but flows readily from a heart opened by receiving compassion and through self-compassion, the various meditations that make up The Compassion Practice invite the practitioner to ground themselves “in whatever ways help [them] to become centered and reconnected with the source of [their] own vitality.” Once grounded, they are invited to tend to the “FLAGS” that are activated within them, “connect[ing] empathically with the cry of [their] soul hidden within his or her emotions and behaviors”, and proceeding to cultivate compassion for another only when the practitioner has adequately tended their own inner cries. With a heart thus opened, the practitioner can

²⁵ Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 27.

proceed to observing the other in their mind's eye, attempting to discern the "FLAGS" that are active within them. Sensing whether there is a sacred source of compassion holding us, and the other, further opens our hearts, enabling us to extend that compassion in tangible acts.²⁶

I experienced the practice in guided meditations during the first intensive course I attended as part of the D. Min. program, and knew I wanted to continue learning compassion through practicing the guided meditations. Frank Rogers kindly shared audio files of the meditations, and they have been pivotal in my spiritual renewal, as my excerpts from my journals will illustrate.

The Journals: Bringing the Parts Together

The journals from the first few months of my D. Min. project reveal how the various parts of my project and coursework worked synergistically to move me toward spiritual renewal.

My journaling style is to transcribe passages from my daily readings that speak to me, and then to write in a stream-of-consciousness way about what emerges for me as I reflect on the readings. I write whatever arises, without censoring myself, which "bypasses the discursive mind and delivers us to the source of our being."²⁷

I capture dreams that seem interesting in as much detail as I can, giving them titles and recording them in present tense.

I record the images, feelings, and sensations that arise in the Compassion Practice meditations, and the insights I draw from them, and I allow different parts of myself to dialog freely with one another.

²⁶ Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 19.

²⁷ Richard Rohr, paraphrasing Mirabai Starr, *Fallow Time* (blog), *Center for Action and Contemplation*, November 12, 2019, <https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/>.

In reviewing my journals for this project, I was able to see very clearly how the readings, meditations, and journaling worked synergistically, opening me to insight, compassionate self-awareness, deeper understanding of others, and connection to the spirit of life and love.

It would be nearly impossible to describe this in a linear, narrative way, so perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to share journal excerpts from a couple of particularly fruitful phases in the project.

The First Few Months

An early meditation on Welcoming Presence from the Compassion Practice showed me quite clearly where I was trapped: An image emerged of “a little girl in a shirt – or maybe a Brownie uniform or bib overall shirt in brown, holding onto bars. She’s in a cage or prison. And she’s frustrated as hell.” Within the meditation, the image was followed by this auditory message: “Lay it all down. The perfectionism, the hyper-responsibility, the vigilance about details.” In my journal, I responded to the image, whom I understood as a child part of myself: “...little em, I see you there, not trusting anyone, including me. Looking for guidance. Fearful that being too clear about your need will lead to you being abandoned...” I saw that I was trapped by my characteristic way of doing things, and by my fear of abandonment. (June 02, 2017)

In that same entry, my response to a reading from *Praying with Process Theology* by Bruce Epperly revealed the depth of my thirst for a life-giving theology:

Honestly, I feel so relieved to think I might be loved and there might be something (God?) that longs for my flourishing...I feel a deep longing for something beyond the limits I imagine. Could I possibly embrace feeling so loved, trusting in a love...I need not

earn, but simply accept? Could I stop pushing it away and simply rest in it?” (June 02, 2017).

Epperly’s affirmation: “My life matters to God. God seeks to bring beauty out of my brokenness”, and his prompt to action: “Whose life, in its ‘wreckage’ are you called to support and heal with God’s inspiration and grace?”, evoked this journal entry in the same time frame²⁸:

I confess my brokenness...that I do not care tenderly for the body and life that are mine. That my body is a wreckage, not a temple, at least if I consider how I treat it...What am I called to respond to in a healing manner? First, myself. My body, in which I breathe, through which I minister, love the world, understand and embrace tragic beauty. (May 31, 2017)

In fairly short order, my journals also revealed how deeply process theology resonated with me. Process Theology quickly became a life-giving lens through which I could understand my history, and which I could draw upon to understand both my past and my experiences.

For example, in response to reading that “Alfred North Whitehead speaks of worship as an adventure of the spirit,”²⁹ I wrote: “Much better than ‘shaping things of worth’”, which is common in Unitarian Universalist congregations. “How exciting to believe this. I am drawn by the promise of it – of feeling it, believing it, trusting it.” (June 5, 2017).

An Espoused Theology

²⁸ Epperly, *Praying with Process Theology*, 23.

²⁹ Epperly, *Praying with Process Theology*, 35.

A few months into my study of Process Theology, I felt comfortable espousing it as my theology. This term paper that I wrote at the time reframed vital life experiences, including my call narrative and experiences in ministry, through the lens of Process Theology:

Adventures with the Spirit of Life³⁰

An Eager New Minister

Eight years ago, I was a newly-ordained UU minister, about to serve in my first interim ministry position. I approached that ministry eagerly, with a sense of adventure, excitement, confidence and zest.

When I went to interview with the search committee for my first interim ministry, we gathered in their beautiful new sanctuary. The first thing they did, after introductions, was ask if I'd like to sing something. They'd read in my bio that I am a singer and songwriter, and the first thing they did upon meeting me was invite me to share that gift. I fairly flew to the chancel, and as I sang, I looked around at the beautiful, light-filled space they'd created, the large windows that brought the outdoors in, and I noticed a small ceramic bird high up in the eaves. I knew then that these were people with whom I could create more beauty, and I felt my heart swell with joy.

The ministry I shared with that congregation was wonderful. The healthy, vibrant, can-do congregation of about 175 people in a small college town in Vermont welcomed me with open arms, appreciated my leadership, welcomed the spiritual renewal I brought,

³⁰ Emily Melcher, “Adventures with the Spirit of Life: Toward a Process-Theological View of Unitarian Universalist Interim Ministry” (Term Paper, Process Theology and Ministry, Claremont School of Theology, 2017).

and even relinquished their aversion to religious language during my tenure with them. For my part, I brought myself, my presence, my caring, my gifts and skills, and all the energy of a new minister.

I drew heavily on the best practices I'd learned in my training for interim ministry, and on resources developed by my colleagues in interim ministry, and I connected regularly with mentors, colleagues, and district and national staff. I was a good "fit" for that congregation, and they for me, and during my two years with them, we loved each other well and did good ministry together.

I also practiced excellent self-care during those two years: I journaled regularly, practiced mindfulness-based stress reduction, exercised faithfully, and ate healthy food. I sang a lot, both as my own means of connecting with the sacred, and in my ministry, and the congregation welcomed my gift of music and recognized it as integral to my ministry with them.

Indeed, music has been a source of joy and central spiritual practice for me for as long as I can remember. Who is it that said, "I was made to run. When I run fast, I feel God's joy?" Well, I was made to sing. When I sing, I feel God's joy. But it's more than that; when I sing of sorrow, pain, or loss, I feel seen, and known and loved. When I was ordained by my home congregation eight years ago, they asked me to promise that I wouldn't stop singing, for they, too, had found my sharing of my music a gift which opened their hearts, and so they charged me to keep sharing that gift in my ministry.

Music as Metaphor

It's not surprising that the 2005 Swedish film, "As It Is in Heaven," spoke to me, and became the central metaphor for my experience.³¹

In the film, a world-famous conductor's failing health prompts him to return to his home village: a small, depressed, hardscrabble community in the far north of Sweden. He's goaded into directing the wretched remnant of a choir in the village church, and things begin to change – for him and for them, as he transforms this odd and unlikely bunch of people into a choir.

He says to them, "Imagine that the music already exists." Pointing heavenward, he continues, "It's up here, all around, vibrating, ready to be brought down...It's all a matter of listening, of making ourselves ready to bring it down."³²

Mostly, they stare at him, baffled, but one man in the back nods in recognition.

And then the conductor goes on, "Each person has their own unique tone, their own individual voice. And we're going to find it."³³

The first step is for each person to tune in to the vibrations in the universe to find the one that resonates with them, to find their unique tone, by listening not only with their ears, but by feeling how the vibrations all around them resonate in their bodies. In this way, they learn to connect with the infinite, bringing the music down into their own bodies and lives. They learn to connect with, and trust, that the music is always there, and that they need only open themselves to it.

Before I encountered Process Theology, I often called myself a Pentecostal humanist, because mystical experience (which Unitarian Universalists, in our inimitable

³¹ Kay Pollak, dir, *As it is in Heaven* (original title: *Så som i himmelen*), 2004: Sweden, GF Studios and Sonet Film, prod. 2005: Lorber Films, US Distr. DVD.

³² Pollak, *As it is in Heaven*.

³³ Pollak, *As it is in Heaven..*

fashion, refer to in our sources as “direct experience of the transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life”) has been central to my spiritual life, even in periods of functional atheism and in light of a “rational”, this-worldly orientation to the cosmos.

Throughout my life, I've experienced that transcending mystery and wonder in singing and dancing; in the process of creation and in creation itself; in nature; in deep human connection, and whenever I have dared to honestly encounter that which lies deep within me.

Like Daniel, the choir director in “As It Is In Heaven,” whose lifelong aim is “to create music that will open hearts,”³⁴ I have always known that "the music" (literally and metaphorically) is there, and my longing – my spiritual work – is to make myself ready to bring it down, not just for myself, but for others as well. In the first congregation I served, I was able to do just that.

Reaching an Impasse

I experienced the second congregation I served as depressed and declining. They were a scrappy, chaotic group of about 350. The depression was palpable from the moment I entered their building. Buoyed, affirmed and informed by my first ministry, I followed my own lights, barreling forward with changes in worship and administration by fiat. I didn't begin by getting to know them for themselves, in their concrete particularity, perhaps because I feared I would lose my own light in the process.

³⁴ Pollak, *As it is in Heaven*.

I failed to recognize that the real power in the organization was held not by the Board, with whom I developed a reasonable working relationship, but by a shadow board -- a group of folks with broad influence, who were dedicated to maintaining the status quo and had no interest in what I might bring, or in the transformative possibilities inherent in the liminal space of a transitional ministry.

It didn't go well, for them or for me.

At an early meeting of the Worship Committee, one of the shadow board announced that "someone" had told her, "the minister shouldn't sing," referring to the fact that I'd sung one of my songs in my first worship service there. In sharing my voice, in bringing the music down, as it were, I had apparently violated "someone's" implicit understanding of the minister's role. I didn't know what to do with that information, other than to say that anonymous feedback isn't helpful to me, and to tuck it away with my rapidly growing list of reasons not to like them.

By Christmas time, I was mirroring their depression and was unable to access that luminous experience of "the transcending mystery and wonder," even through making music. Without that experience to hold me, I slogged through the remaining 18 months with them nearly joylessly. I worked incredibly hard, and accomplished important tasks of interim ministry, but the cost was enormous.

When I look back on this experience, I know that my ego, rather than careful discernment, led me to accept the position with this congregation. Someone with a tougher hide and more experience might have served them better and been less affected by their dysfunction; I had entered the system puffed up and full of myself from a

wonderful experience with a previous congregation, and had gotten the stuffing knocked out of me.

Six months after my ministry with them ended, well and thankfully into my third interim ministry with a relatively healthy, open-hearted congregation, I got sick, and was sick for several months. Congregational leaders wondered aloud if the congregation was wearing me down, but I recognized my persistent health problems as a delayed response to powering through my painful second ministry and losing touch with my spiritual grounding and self-care. I had reached an impasse, and my body was saying “No.”

But I still had about 18 months left with that congregation, and I knew “doing it differently” couldn’t wait. During my summer break, I spent time with people who asked provocative questions that helped me to realize that I had let most of my spiritual practices and the things that gave me joy go by the wayside. I rarely sang, and was frequently recycling old sermons rather than doing the creative, transforming work of writing new ones. These good friends and colleagues were the presence of God for me, though I didn’t think of it in those terms then, and their perceptive questions and loving attention recalled me to myself. The result was that during my second year with that congregation, I sang more frequently, including singing a couple of concerts, and regularly engaged in study, reflection, and writing fresh, new sermons. My health returned, and by the end of my ministry with them, I had begun to feel rejuvenated. Part of me was tempted to seek another interim ministry at that point, but I still longed for spiritual renewal and knew the folly of ignoring that longing.

A New Theology

While working on my M.Div., I'd learned just enough about Process Theology to pique my interest, and I suspected it might resonate with me. When I enrolled in a course titled "Process Ministry and Spirituality," I entered into what Bruce Epperly refers to as "an adventure with God."³⁵ This has been a profoundly integrative adventure, providing me with a new lens through which to view my life experiences, a deeper understanding of "As It Is in Heaven," and, most importantly, a vision for my future religious leadership that is grounded not solely in the incomparable and transformative experience of the transcending mystery and wonder, but also in a robust, healthy, and life-affirming theology.

For decades, there had been a disconnect between my experience of the holy and my understanding of it. But it wasn't always that way.

Rapprochement: The Journey Away From, and Back toward God

As a child, raised in the Episcopal Church, I understood my experiences of the holy in terms of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Of course, those experiences prehended my doctrinal understanding, but it was useful to conceive of them in that way.

I spent my senior year of high school in Sweden, a secular democracy where human beings worked together, apparently without a God, to create a society that ensured the best possibility for all, and I began to doubt the theology and doctrines of my childhood faith. My homecoming coincided with the revelation of our Rector's sexual

³⁵ Bruce G. Epperly, *Process Theology: Embracing Adventure with God* (Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2014).

abuse of children in the congregation, and I left the church, slamming the door on my way out. I dismissed God and his patriarchy, human and divine.

In the absence of theology, what remained, and was accessible to me from time to time (especially when I prepared myself to receive it) were those direct, lived experiences. I dismissed “the Holy Spirit” as nothing more than the name I had been taught to give them, and resolved to live without that name, and without religious community, keeping only the experience.

It turns out that, in slamming the door on church and God, I slammed a door in my heart. Process theology is helping me to open the door again.

In his manuscript, *Church Ahead*, Bruce Epperly notes:

...the [postmodern] emphasis on experience challenges churches to explore life-changing and inspiring theological visions. Experience and theological reflection are the yin-yang of the spiritual adventure. The recognition that all theological visions are limited and incomplete does not require us to dispense with theology altogether. In a pluralistic, postmodern age, theology is actually more important than ever.³⁶

Indeed, the shortcomings of my own emphasis on experience over theology challenge me to embrace a life-affirming and inspiring theological vision. Process Theology is doing for me what Epperly says that theology, at its best, does: “transforming [my life] by providing an insightful vision of reality that enables [me] to find meaning, inspiration, and challenge.”³⁷

It turns out that because Process Theology resonates deeply with my lived experience, I find myself very open to it. In addition, the humility with which Process

³⁶ Bruce Gordon Epperly, *Church Ahead*, Electronic manuscript, 2017, 29. Shared with students in Epperly’s course on Process Theology, Spirituality and Ministry, Claremont School of Theology, Summer 2017.

³⁷ Bruce G. Epperly, *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, T & T Clark Guides for the Perplexed (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), Kindle Loc 89.

theologians hold and share their views, born of their recognition that all theology is partial and provisional, has allowed Process Theology to slip stealthily past my defenses.

Process theologians have helped me to understand why theology matters to someone like me. While affirming that “Our immediate experience is the final court of appeal,”³⁸ John J. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin write:

Beliefs about matters of ultimate concern held with deep conviction over a long period are particularly efficacious in shaping one’s character, purposes, and general emotional-attitudinal-behavioral stance.³⁹

They go on to quote Whitehead:

‘A religion, on its doctrinal side, can thus be defined as a system of general truths which have the effect of transforming character when they are sincerely held and vividly apprehended. In the long run, your character and your conduct of life depend on your intimate convictions.’⁴⁰

I have longed for exactly this: convictions that will help shape my character, purposes, and general emotional-attitudinal-behavioral stance in ways that my mysticism alone doesn’t have the power to do. I have found them in Process Theology. They resonate because I have experienced them before.

The Experience of Grace

During the decades after I dismissed God, I found myself spiraling downward. I don’t mean to imply straight-forward causality, but I do suspect that the absence of a life-giving theology and a community of faith were among the strands that contributed to that

³⁸ John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 40.

³⁹ Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, 33.

⁴⁰ Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, 33.

downward spiral. Eventually, in the throes of a depression disguised as rage, and full of self-loathing and shame, I sought therapy. The loving and responsive God steered me toward a therapist who embodied the process-theological “carer” Gordon E. Jackson describes in *Pastoral Care and Process Theology*:

...therapy comes through inter-personal relations. Experience of new reality, such as acceptance and respect, are introduced into the stream of the client by way of the carer (and vice-versa eventually). Conformal feelings are one way these new experiences are grasped by the client. By hooking into the carer’s accepting of [her], new patterns of self-acceptance and self-respect have their beginnings and their validation.⁴¹

Seeing myself through my therapist’s eyes and soaking in the respect and loving care he showed me enabled me, over time, to feel and think differently about myself, and about those around me. A year into therapy, longing for something more than the constricted life I was leading, and aware that I needed spiritual grounding in addition to psychological help, I said to my therapist: “I know what I used to do when I felt depressed.”

“What did you do?” he responded.

“I sang, and I wrote, and I prayed,” I said.

“You can still do all those things, Emily,” he said, gently and matter-of-factly.

In that responsive interchange, I heard myself name a provocative possibility, and I heard my therapist confirm it. That was all I needed to believe that a way could be made out of no way.

⁴¹ Gordon E. Jackson, *Pastoral Care and Process Theology* (Washington, D.C: University Press of America, 1981), 37.

A few days later, I found my way to a UU congregation. It had been nearly 20 years since I'd left the church of my childhood, and I was rather attached to my self-image as one who had seen through the sham of religion, so I was surprised as I was leaving the service that day by a little voice inside me saying, "I'd like to be a minister in this church." In light of Process Theology, I now believe that what I heard was God's aim for me. It would be five years before I would be ready to align my aim for myself with God's call.

During those years, I was very active in the congregation. Their ways of being in community might well be understood in terms of Henry Nelson Wieman's "creative interchange":

Creative interchange is that kind of interchange which creates in those who engage in it an appreciative understanding of the original experience of one another...

...Creative interchange has two aspects which are the two sides of the same thing. One aspect is the understanding in some measure of the original experience of the other person. The other aspect is the integration of what one gets from others in such a way as to create progressively the original experience which is oneself.⁴²

A congregation of 1300 members, they were attentive to creating small-group experiences where people could have the sort of interchange that allowed them to come to know one another deeply. In those settings, I was seen, known, and loved, even as I had the experience of deeply encountering others who were unlike me. Each of us grew through our interchange.

⁴² Henry Nelson Wieman, *Man's Ultimate Commitment*, with new preface and introduction (Lanham, MD: University Press of America. 1991), 22-3.

I would say that being in community with them enabled me to grow in what Bernard Loomer calls “size”, and Patricia Adams Farmer refers to as “a fat soul”.⁴³ Both “size” and “a fat soul” refer to an individual’s ability take diversity into them self without losing them self, and to encourage the same in others. My experience in my home congregation helped me to grow in “size”, to grow “a fat soul”.

Furthermore, the values of that congregation, expressed and embodied in worship, programs, and administration, helped me move beyond self-interest to community engagement, and ultimately to world-loyalty.

During that period, I continued to work with my therapist, and he continued to offer provocative possibilities. Perhaps none had a greater impact than his suggestion that I might use my “growing songwriting skills” (the phrase itself suggested a new way of understanding the potential of that gift) to work through something difficult I was dealing with. I’d laid my heart before him, asking him to be, or at least to provide, salvation; he skillfully redirected me to my own resources, which were a gift from God. Accepting the invitation, I began listening for the song. I knew it wasn’t accurate to think of writing it myself; if it was going to happen, it was going to be a matter of me receiving it. Thankfully, I did!

In the months and years that followed, I learned to trust that when I took long walks, singing as I walked, or improvised on my guitar for long enough to get into my body and the experience of the music, listening with my whole self in a receptive way, something would come to me: a theme, a riff, a single line of music would emerge from I knew not where, and I would work with it, and play with it, until it was a song. What was

⁴³ Epperly, *Praying with Process Theology*, 74, 80.

magical, enchanted, about the process was that, in the course of allowing the song to take shape, whatever problem I'd been struggling with was transformed. In my body/mind/spirit, and in the words that came to me, the songwriting process and the song lyrics transformed my pain into something new, and the experience brought me joy.

In light of process theology, I can see that somehow, in that creative process, I was doing something beautiful, for myself and for God, whom I now believe wants my flourishing. In sharing "my" music, I do something beautiful for others, and I have been blessed over and over by people telling that my music has touched, moved, and changed them. In that way, my own transformation, expressed in the body of music I co-created with God during that period in my life, has served as a provocative possibility, an invitation, or a lure for others.

For me, the songwriting and singing are exquisite, magical, transcendent, embodied, fully alive experiences, in which God and I are partners. And it all begins with listening beneath, or beyond, or perhaps within the challenges I face.

Each song that emerged during that intense and transformative period contributed to making something beautiful out of the wreckage of my life.

Aligning My Aim with God's

Many threads were woven together to bring about a creative transformation in me: The creative-responsive love my therapist offered me; my longing for fullness of life for myself; my increasingly attentive and effective spiritual and physical self-care; the creative interchange I experienced in my home congregation; my creative self-expression in song-writing; and sharing my gift of song with others all played a role. Transformed by

the gracious movement and interconnections of all of these things, I was finally ready to align my aim with God's call.

A Process Understanding of “As It Is in Heaven” Emerges

This new understanding of my own experiences through the lens of Process Theology led me to wonder how I might experience and understand “As It Is in Heaven” now. In watching it again recently, I was struck by all I hadn’t seen in my previous viewings over the course of more than a decade. It’s not that my earlier reading was wrong, but as I embrace Process Theology, I see and affirm theological aspects of the film that eluded me when my worldview was rich with experience, but void of theology.

The film opens with the conductor, Daniel, reaching an impasse, due to his failing health. In voice-over, he recalls that “Ever since I was a child, I’ve dreamed of making music that will open hearts.”⁴⁴ That dream lured him away from his village for training, as Jesus was lured toward the temple. By the time Daniel returns to his village, he has been away for several decades, performing all over the world. In the wake of a heart attack that forces him to stop touring, God provides childhood memories to lure him homeward.

Daniel is a process-relational Christ-figure. His aim for himself so closely coincides with God’s aim for him, that he devotes and ultimately sacrifices his life to it. His love of music and his devotion to it are absolute. In creating music, he is always luring others toward the music, rather than toward himself. When Daniel dies, his choir is still singing, luring others to sing along.

⁴⁴ Pollak, *As it is in Heaven*.

Although it's clear that he's been highly sought-after and enormously successful in his professional life, it's not until Daniel returns home to his own people that he finds his circle of disciples: the handicapped, the broken, the lonely, the abused, the promiscuous, the widow, the children, the ill. Daniel is one of them, both because he grew up there, and because he, too is broken, though they don't know it; all they know of him is his fame.

These are people with weighty individual and shared histories. Deep, repressed conflicts surface between them as they play out their conformal feelings, learned in childhood and repeated over and over until they seem nearly fixed.

As it turns out, the container of the choir, once Daniel brings it into a creative-responsive relationship with the music, becomes the cradle for their individual growth and their understanding of one another. It doesn't happen through carefully created processes designed to foster creative interchange, but it promotes a creative interchange suited to them. In their scrappy fighting with one another; in the ways they call one another to task for things that happened years ago; the ways they care for one another; and the anger and tenderness that emerge because the music is so important to them that they become willing to speak the unspeakable and lay bare the unbearable, they hear themselves, and they hear one another.

Through their own particular sort of creative interchange, each and every member grows in size, taking into themselves the realities of the others while finding and maintaining their own unique tones, their own unique experience. When the time comes for them to defend the woman who is being severely abused by the bully who also abused Daniel as a boy, they physically take her into themselves, surrounding her with their

bodies. Later when she announces she's left her abusive husband and has nowhere to go, an older man in the choir says, "You can stay with us. We have room".⁴⁵ When the choir makes its tour to compete in a choir competition in Austria, her children are with them.

Like Jesus, Daniel replaces "the law" of the church (represented in the person of the repressed pastor) with practices that bring them into a relationship with the process-relational force in the universe. He teaches them: First, we listen. Listen to the universe and embody what you hear. Now, listen to one another, and bring your voices into harmony with one another. Now, sing, together. In the music they create together, each individual voice and moment emerges from and is held for eternity in the music itself.

This direct, lived experience of the holy stands in stark juxtaposition to the church's fear-mongering priest, whose bad theology condemns not only Daniel and the freedom and joy that emerge around him, but ultimately the priest in his own broken humanity. While the priest attempts to control the people, Daniel and the music lure them; as a result, they leave the church behind.

Like Jesus, Daniel witnesses and responds appropriately to each individual's joy and pain: He creates a way where there is no way, recognizing a gift in the autistic man's deep toning; writing a song of emotional freedom for the abused woman to sing; making up a bed for the priest's wife when she at last seeks freedom from her miserable husband; and embracing the "lay leadership" of the brash man who arranges a concert and enrolls the choir in a competition without consulting Daniel, or anyone else for that matter. In person and with their pictures spread out before him on his piano, he tunes in to them,

⁴⁵ Pollak, *As it is in Heaven*.

then gently lures them into tuning themselves to each other and to the transcendent source of mystery and wonder.

Daniel is playful and adventurous in his teaching of them; he is also earnest and absolutely certain of the importance of what he's doing. Creative and responsive, he flexibly tries new things, and experiences it all as an adventure.

Like the Jesus of Process Theology, Daniel is thoroughly human. Although he has a life-long ability to "bring the music down," and an unflappable commitment to aligning his own aim with God's aim for him, known to him through his life-long desire to "create music that opens hearts," he, too, is bound by a human, conformal feeling that needs transformation: fear.

The film suggests his fear is rooted in his childhood experiences of being bullied, and reinforced by a professional career that has sheltered him from the messiness of daily life since the death of his mother when he was 14. His professional life has honed and used his gifts, but there's always been something missing, something yet unfulfilled. Awkward in his social interactions, reluctant to engage with others, Daniel nevertheless finds himself drawn into the circle of the choir both by his own need to make music, and by theirs. He appears apprehensive, watchful, perpetually surprised by others' behavior, and oblivious to their feelings for him and his for them.

Almost despite himself, Daniel learns from his choir not only what they need, but what he needs as well. First, he learns how to be in community.

Before they've even gotten started singing, someone calls for a coffee break. He's angered at first, but then Lena, a Mary Magdalene figure, says to him, "This is new to us,

Daniel...and coffee's important, too."⁴⁶ The choir members set the table for the quintessential Swedish ritual: sitting down with one another for coffee and cookies. Daniel relents and joins them. In a subsequent rehearsal, Daniel claps his hands together and joyfully proclaims, "Now, then! It's time for coffee!"⁴⁷

Later in the film, Daniel is beaten bloody and nearly drowned by the abusive man who was his childhood tormenter. Rescued by the choir, Daniel himself learns the love of community. He sits, shivering, on a stool, surrounded by his choir, and reveals his real name, his identity, to them. As one who was raised among them, and has returned not only to lead them, but to be healed, he receives their love and ministrations.

Daniel learns to love not in an abstract sense, but concretely. He also learns to love intimately, physically. From the moment he arrives in the village, Lena (the Mary Magdalene figure) becomes an ally in his development. She is vibrant, fully alive, and wise with experience and a profound ability to care for others. In short, she is the perfect counterpoint to his awkwardness and fear. With kindness, wisdom and playfulness, and despite her own insecurities, she helps him dismantle the walls that have been his fortress. She opens his heart.

At the end of the film, the choir travels to Austria to participate in a choral competition. Daniel catches sight of his former manager and runs to greet him. The manager asks Daniel if he's finally achieved his dream, and Daniel responds, almost with surprise in his voice, "Yes, yes I have!"

"But why?" asks the manager, "Why there? Why these people?"

⁴⁶ Pollak, *As it is in Heaven*.

⁴⁷ Pollak, *As it is in Heaven*.

With surprise and joy overflowing, he replies, “Because they love me. And I love them!”⁴⁸

His own heart thus opened, he runs off to find Lena and declare the love that has been such a surprise to him. They make love, and Lena intuits that their lovemaking has created new life. Beyond himself with joy, Daniel races around town on a bicycle as the choir assembles for their performance. Suddenly he checks the time and realizes he’s late. Meanwhile the choir is assembling on stage, waiting for him to join them.

Daniel arrives back at the concert hall, winded, and runs up the stairs, just as the autistic boy in the choir begins toning. The other choir members slowly join in, bringing the music of the universe down into their own bodies, tuning themselves to one another and to the music itself.

Daniel, whose damaged but wide-open heart can’t take the exertion of the bike ride and running up the stairs, grips his chest, then stumbles into a restroom where he falls, splitting his temple open on the sink. Alone in the restroom, the life ebbing out of him, he hears their singing through a speaker, and a smile forms on his lips. In the performance hall, choirs from every nation are lured to their feet to join in the toning begun by his choir, just as people from every nation have been lured to God by the story told by Jesus’s disciples, just as all creation has sung God’s praise.

As Daniel passes from this life, we see what he experiences: himself as a grown man, running into the field where he was beaten by bullies as a child, running toward a young boy who stands facing him with outstretched arms.

New life, indeed.

⁴⁸ Pollak, *As it is in Heaven*.

A Theology for Liminal Spaces

The departure of a minister is an impasse. Whether anticipated or not, it brings to an end what has been, and thrusts a congregation into a liminal space. As an intentional interim minister, I enter into that space as both minister and coach, to accompany the congregation through their two-year journey toward calling another settled minister.

As noted earlier, I embraced my calling to interim ministry as an adventure, with anticipation and zest. I embraced it with considerable personal experience, gifts, skills and training. AND, I embraced it without having a life-affirming, spiritually grounded theology to guide and shape my life and my work. I knew the experience of the holy and longed to help others experience it. I knew the experience of creative interchange and had developed some skills for fostering it in congregations. I knew the experience of creative transformation and believed I could help others experience it as well. And indeed, I have done all of those things in my ministries.

What I didn't have until recently was a theology that could inform my own spiritual life, shape my presence as a leader, and sustain me when the going got tough, as it sometimes did.

Now I do. Bruce Epperly invites readers "to reflect on the question, 'What theological values shape my life?'"⁴⁹ Today, I can do that.

- I affirm a process-relational vision of God as an ongoing and eternal source of creativity and responsive love. I believe that God is active in the world and is

⁴⁹ Epperly, *Church Ahead*, 60.

always seeking to bring about that which is best for each being (human and non-human) in each moment. In terms of my ministerial role, this vision reminds me that I am not God, and I sense it is helping me stop trying to behave as if I were. It allows me to trust, and gently point to, a source and resource beyond myself, rather than trying to *be* that resource.

- I trust that God has always been with me, and will always be with me, regardless of my ability to “feel” God in a given moment or situation. My mysticism is vital to me and to my ministry; now my conscious beliefs are aligned with my prehensive experience, and I believe they will sustain me in times when I am unable to feel the presence of God or my connection to the universe. Holding and sharing this open-ended, life-affirming theology will provide the “yang” to the “yin” of mystical experience, enabling me to minister in ways I have not had available to me in the past.
- I believe God operates through persuasion rather than coercion, and it is my desire to learn to lead from God’s example. God is present not just as a transcendent force, but in the messy details of every life, providing provocative possibilities for each next moment of concrescence. I hope to be able to be present to my congregants in similar ways: seeing, knowing, and loving the people as they really are, while believing and holding out provocative possibilities for their next moment of concrescence. I hope to be more patient, recognizing that many strands of experience, many prior moments of concrescence are interwoven with God’s aim, the individual’s aim, others’ aims for the individual, biology, and even

chance in their current concrescence, and that every moment holds the possibility for something new to emerge.

- I believe that God's aim is revealed in flashes of insight, dreams, and the process of creation as well as in that which is created. It is also revealed through science and reason, in human interactions, and in our interactions with other beings and the world. In my ministry, I will invite people to tune in to insight, wisdom and revelation wherever they may find them. I also want to invite people to share with one another the sources and experiences of revelation in their lives, so that others might be enriched and grow "fat souls".
- I believe that what I do makes a difference to God, that I am a co-creative partner with God, and that holds true for every other being. This theological stance invites and challenges me to live fully and to do, or create, something beautiful for God whenever and wherever I can.
- I believe that the universe is a dynamic, interdependent process. Because everything is radically interconnected, what any one of us does matters to the world, and to God. I hope that this vision might be as a source of meaning and purpose not only for me, but for those with whom I minister.
- I believe that God's aim for the universe, and for us, is maximizing enjoyment, or depth and intensity of experience through increasing novelty and beauty.

Therefore, God wants and needs me, and other creatures, to live full, abundant lives, to embrace the adventure with God by being fully present, and to maximize enjoyment for God and all beings.

- I see Jesus as the human being who, in his own time and place, most fully aligned his aim for himself with God's aim for him. I see his relationship to God as spiritual, rather than familial.
- I embrace the belief that ethical issues must always be addressed in the concrete situations and conditions from which they arise, rather than in the abstract. Life exists in the tension between competing needs; ethical decisions are those which maximize possibility and freedom for all beings and the earth.

Considering my own history, it's no coincidence that I was called to ministry in a tradition with a de facto "don't ask, don't tell" culture around theology. I imagine that was the best for the impasse!

Unitarian Universalism is a post-Christian, pluralistic tradition bound by shared values and an oft-articulated appreciation of "a community of like-minded individuals." People generally don't recognize that the desire for a "like-minded community" is in tension with the possible benefits of openly sharing our theologies or other worldviews, and the experiences associated with them, with one another, such as growing in stature precisely through that creative interchange. I understand this, because I've felt it myself.

The identified tasks of interim ministry focus on institutional renewal, and its identified goal is preparing a congregation to be ready to call its next settled minister. Through trial and error, I have come to believe that the call to interim ministry is a call not just to institutional renewal, but to something without which our congregations won't survive: spiritual renewal. I believe that I need to be grounded in, informed by, and faithful to an evolving and life-affirming theology in order to accompany, and in some

sense, lead them in that process. My experience has shown me that I need theology in order to be an effective pastoral presence when the going gets tough.

Bruce Epperly asks, “What form of spiritual CPR does your congregation need?”⁵⁰ I suspect that the congregations I serve need exactly the same form of spiritual renewal I needed both during my initial depression and when I became ill after a particularly difficult ministry: evolving, life-affirming theologies that can “transform [their] lives by providing an insightful vision of reality that enables persons to find meaning, inspiration, and challenge.”⁵¹ They also need direct experience of the transcending mystery and wonder to help them “be fire;”⁵² and creative interchange with other human beings to grow in stature and move from individual to world loyalty.

As I continue my adventure with Process Theology, my hope is that I might find effective ways to share it with the congregations I serve, not to coerce their belief, but as a provocative possibility for their becoming.

Praying with Process Theology

*Spirit of Adventure, remain with me as I move toward my next interim ministry.
Bless me and fill my heart with excitement for the journey. Open me to the actualities and concreteness before me, that I might be truly present with and to them, loving them as they are and trusting you to guide me in pointing them toward their emerging calling, which is your aim for them. Amen.*

⁵⁰ Epperly, *Church Ahead*, 35.

⁵¹ Epperly, *Process Theology*, Kindle Loc 89.

⁵² Bruce Gordon Epperly and Katherine Gould Epperly, *Feed the Fire! Avoiding Clergy Burnout* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 1.

Living into a New Theology

Writing this term paper was an integrative process to be sure. Nevertheless, I don't want to suggest that my course work in Process Theology, or living with it in the ways I did as part of this project, settled the matter once and for all for me. Indeed, a few months after writing the paper, I attended a retreat with UU clergy colleagues on the theme "Where Leads Our Call?" and discovered that I was still struggling to live in awareness of the love that holds me, still striving as if my worthiness depended on my over-functioning.

At the retreat, the facilitators posed questions that hit at the heart of my struggle: "Do you try to 'earn' excellence through the activities of ministry? What might change if you 'leaned' into the notion that ministry is a gift to be cherished and nurtured and not achieved?" In response to the questions, I spontaneously wrote

I would slow the fuck down. I would be present. I would wonder what is and what might be, and stop pushing so hard – myself, others. I might learn to rest in love, and thereby live in and model loving.

By the time I'd finished writing, I was weeping. The appearance of the expletive in my journal reveals the depth of my longing and my grief at not having let go of striving.

"What is your sense of how theology informs excellence in ministry and/or in your call?" they asked next.

I responded:

I have experienced radical transformation—the grace-filled experience of it, and I long to share that experience—offer it to people. To bear witness to it—not in my words alone, but in my personhood. And I do, but I want to even more.

[With regard to] Process Theology – I want to believe in the love holding us, and I've experienced it, but I forget it all the time. I need to relate to it in a more real and present way—maybe I need to invite it into my music—to ask the questions I need to ask.

(October 31, 2017)

In my journal, I noted this quote which was part of the PowerPoint presentation at the retreat, where it was attributed to Joseph Campbell: “You must give up the life you planned in order to live the life that is waiting for you.”

I noted two films that inspire reflection on my call to ministry: “City of Joy” and “The Shack”. Then I wrote:

And a robust and ongoing conversation with God. Listen for new music. It doesn’t sound like the voice of little em – it sounds different. I haven’t begun to hear it yet.

It may be [that I will hear it] in listening to other music – and it may be in laying down my resistance to the direct and open conversation with God.

Suddenly, I was struck by the insight that thinking of engaging in a direct and open conversation with God evokes a sense of shame in me, and causes me to try to couch my theology “in general terms that someone else will find acceptable – just as I needed to couch my relationship with my therapist. The shame is familiar and relates to my desire to be perceived as smart, completely independent.” (Oct. 31, 2017)

I had for so long equated my rejection of belief in God with being smart, and independence with being skillful and capable. That equation had failed me, but it was clearly activated in the sense of shame I felt about owning a belief in God.

Less than two weeks later, I recorded a dream, which I titled “Jumping and Finding Myself Supported”:

In the dream, I need to reach the ground from high atop a fortress wall overlooking the sea. It’s almost unimaginably tall, and for reasons I can’t recall as I record the dream in my journal, I’m about to jump over the edge. I am completely at ease – no anxiety. I’m holding on to a gauzy white fabric, which flutters in the wind as I simply lean off the side of the terrace and begin to fall.

It’s a way to get down.

I’m the only one – or maybe the first one – to take it. Others are trying to figure out other ways to get down and get somewhere. There’s no panic – it doesn’t seem urgent, but I guess I’m just ready to go.

I fall very slowly; the long trail of white gauzy fabric trailing behind me. I consider what position will make for the least uncomfortable landing and decide it will be landing on my back.

I easily switch position, so that I’m floating down/falling face up, when I notice my descent has stopped completely. I’m still high in the air, and now I’m floating off toward a distant shoreline. I’m facing down again, and ahead.

I have odd, bulky, stuffed wings (like pillows, only roughly butterfly-wing shaped.) They don’t flap, but somehow, together with the fabric still attached to my back, I’m comfortably floating through the air.

I’m aware and surprised by the fact that I’m not afraid at all. I wonder if that relates to putting music to the words I heard Father Gregory Boyle telling about on the radio on “This American Life” yesterday, which he said were a mantra from the “homie”

(a young man in the program Boyle runs in Los Angeles for former gang members) whom Boyle doesn't name, but says he thinks of as his chaplain: "I rest in you, resting in me."

I drove for six hours through driving rain and fierce wind that night, singing over and over, "I rest in you, resting in me." (Nov. 14, 2017) The singing soothed me and allowed me to drop into the sense of trust it describes. (See Appendix 1)

Here, then, was an answer to my intuition, expressed a few days prior, that I needed to listen for new music. This was very different from the sort of songs I'd written years earlier. It turned out that the new music I needed to hear, and to sing, at least for the time being, was much like this piece: brief, simple chants that invite the repetitive singing that allows me to drop down out of my head and into the rhythm and resonance of my body, which connects me to the universe. These embodied prayers find their response in my singing of them.

My journal the same day recounts my extemporaneous telling of a story for all in worship a few days earlier, in which a stuffed dragon I often use in my storytelling flies high into the air, and spots the waterhole that will give all the animals relief from a drought that threatens their lives. (Nov. 14, 2017)

A few months later, an image came to me in the Compassion Practice: "I am seeing god, reaching out to me, inviting me into a playful dance. Not rocking the child who's afraid she won't be loved, and who's working so hard to be perfect, to be the best, but inviting her/me, to dance." (Jan. 6, 2018)

The Compassion Practice, and other spiritual practices, were helping me to sense the gracious, expansive love as a cosmic source of compassion that flows through all human expressions of compassion, rather than coming from them. This was critical for me, both because that means it is ever available, and because being a conduit for compassion is possible for me even when being a source of it is not. Furthermore, when I open myself to that cosmic source of compassion, so that it can flow through me, I am bathed in it myself. I described this awareness in the lyrics to another song: “Love fill me, flow through me, to all the world.” (See Appendix 2)

The development of this insight was fortunate, because I would shortly find myself sorely in need of compassion, both from the people around me, and from a source beyond them.

It turned out that resting in God’s love wasn’t a goal to be accomplished through the D. Min. project I’d designed; I was soon to find myself in an experience I hadn’t chosen or designed, and didn’t want, and that experience was what would ultimately teach me what I know today about letting go and resting in love.

Only then could I see that I had unconsciously built into my project design the very problem I was trying to address: In identifying what was lacking in my practice of ministry, and striving to fill that lack by adding upward of 1.5 hours of spiritually nourishing activities to my daily commitments, without setting aside a commensurate amount of time from other commitments, I risked overextending myself again. Because I wasn’t in a ministry position at the time, I didn’t have to discover that through another round of burn-out in ministry. I was fortunate instead to have my ego ousted from the driver’s seat before I sought my next ministry position.

This is not to diminish all that I learned through engaging the project as I designed it; indeed, through this project, I have embraced Process Theology as a life-giving theological

orientation, and the Compassion Practice has helped me to reconnect with a transcendent source of compassion that nurtures me and helps me connect compassionately with myself and others.

A few months into the project, I was forced to abandon the specifics of my project design. The goal remained unchanged throughout the project, but the path to it has been different than what I imagined, and the new ministry in which I find myself is one I couldn't have imagined when I embarked on this process. Rather than working methodically toward the goal of a theologically grounded, sustaining, sustainable, and creative practice of ministry, I was forced to surrender my will and my striving and truly fall into a liminal space, where I turned toward attending instead.

Chapter 5: Falling

Illusion of Control

“If you hold on to the handle, she said, it’s easier to maintain the illusion of control. But it’s more fun if you just let the wind carry you.”⁵³

What happened next can hardly be described as fun, but it certainly left me without any illusion of control.

Once again, my body said, “No.” Full stop. It quite literally forced me to surrender not just my adherence to my D. Min. project design, not just my hope that more learning and greater discipline in my spiritual practices and creative life would lead to a sustaining and sustainable practice of ministry, and not just the large church ministry I had long believed I was heading toward, but something more essential than all of these things: It forced me to surrender my false, or ego, self.

I had heard the voice that told me I was dying as a warning that I needed to learn to do ministry differently, and in the way that is natural for the ego-self, I behaved as though a break from active ministry and greater commitment to the things I believed had been missing would do the trick. I was operating out of a deficit model, believing that I could develop a sustaining and sustainable practice of ministry by adding the things I felt were lacking. This was my false self, thinking I knew what I needed, and striving for it.

⁵³ Brian Andreas, "Illusion of Control," *Going Somewhere Soon, Vol. 3: Collected Stories & Drawings of Brian Andreas* (Decorah, IA: StoryPeople, 1995), Kindle Loc. 69.

The greatest learning of this project was to come not through dedicated (or willful) adherence to the D. Min. project I'd designed, but through a months-long descent into debilitating physical pain which, at its worst, deprived me of the capacity to hold a book or a pen, stay awake during meditation, take the long walks which have always been part of my song-writing process, and play the piano or guitar.

I'd been engaging the Compassion Practice for over a year by the time references to pain began to appear in my journals, and that practice was steadily deepening both my lived experience of connection to a sacred source of compassion, and my conviction that there is, indeed, a universal source of love that holds everything.

Coursework in Process Theology, and living with it through daily reflections and prayer from Bruce Epperly's *Praying with Process Theology* and other books had taken hold, not as a complete, wholly-integrated belief system, but as an ever-present invitation to recognize the creative, responsive love that continually seeks the best for all, placing before me the best for each impasse, and luring me in a multitude of ways toward that which is most life-giving.

Daily meditations from Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation offered me broad and evolving understandings of Christianity that helped open my mind and heart, and, to my surprise, often aligned with the ideas from process theology.

A variety of other sources were deepening my capacity to embody the compassion I was receiving.

In a very real sense, I was achieving the developmental aims I'd identified at the outset of my D. Min. project, though I had yet to field test the ultimate goal of the project: developing a sustaining and sustainable practice of ministry. That wouldn't come until I'd descended deeper into the liminal space as a result of physical pain and disability, which knocked me to my knees,

forced me to reckon with my ego, helped me to reclaim my true self, and pointed me in a new direction professionally.

True and False Selves

I find it useful to think in terms of the distinction made by psychologist Donald Winnicott, and elaborated by spiritual thinkers such as Thomas Merton, Howard E. Friend, Parker Palmer, and Susan Beaumont between the true self and the false, or ego self.

Quaker activist, author and master teacher Parker J. Palmer describes the distinction in these words:

All of us arrive on earth with souls in perfect form. But from the moment of birth onward, the soul or true self is assailed by deforming forces from without and within: by racism, sexism, economic injustice, and other social cancers; by jealousy, resentment, self-doubt, fear and other demons of the inner life...⁵⁴

...We arrive in this world undivided, integral, whole. But sooner or later, we erect a wall between our inner and outer lives, trying to protect what is within us or to deceive the people around us. Only when the pain of our dividedness becomes more than we can bear do most of us embark on an inner journey toward living ‘divided no more.’⁵⁵

The wall we erect to protect ourselves isn’t just between our true selves and the outer world; it also creates a divide within us. Parker notes that, although shy and self-protective, the true self longs to assert itself. “...the true self will come to our rescue, if we let it,” writes Palmer, because “The divided life is pathological, and it always gives rise to symptoms.”⁵⁶ These symptoms can lead to what has often been called a dark night of the soul. When one practices attentiveness to that experience, one may emerge with a decision to “live divided no more,”

⁵⁴ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 34.

⁵⁵ Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 39.

⁵⁶ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 56–72.

recognizing that the cost of a divided life is greater than the cost anyone could exact from us for living from our true selves. It seems to me today that my experience of pain and disability may in fact have been a symptom that I was living a divided life.

In his short volume on vocation, *Let Your Life Speak*, Palmer recounts how his own vocational journey has shifted as he has increasingly allowed himself to uncover and be led by his true self. With tremendous generosity and humility, he shares pivotal experiences that demonstrated to him that he was being driven by his false self, and reflects on what he learned about his capacities and limitations, which enabled him to stop striving for a way of being that was antithetical to his nature, or to his true self.

Palmer writes about his experience of a prolonged depression, during which he lost all capacity to maintain his false self, and was forced to simply receive the care of others.⁵⁷ That experience, which was to be repeated more than once in his life, led him to conclude that “the way to God is down.”⁵⁸ Palmer’s descent into depression ultimately allowed him to reclaim his true self, beloved not for what he could do, but for himself. No act of will could have enabled Palmer to find his way back to his true self, but he found it, and God, through his descent into metaphorical darkness.

Susan Beaumont’s vision of congregational leadership in liminal times is grounded in presence,⁵⁹ which is only possible for the true self. The false or ego-self has too much to protect and too much to prove and is therefore unable to make the shifts in orientation that Beaumont identifies as hallmarks of leading with presence: from knowing to unknowing; from advocating

⁵⁷ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 45.

⁵⁸ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 69.

⁵⁹ Susan Beaumont, “Leading in a Liminal Season,” workshop (Luther Seminary-Kairos Courses, St. Paul, MN, August 24, 2018).

to attending; and from striving to surrender.⁶⁰ She identifies knowing, advocating, and striving as strategies of the false self.

In light of these descriptions, it's easy enough for me to see the false or ego self at work in my life, my ministry, and the D. Min. project I designed. No doubt my true self is there as well, in my longing for healing and wholeness and my desire for a theology and spiritual practices that would be sustaining and sustainable. My strategies, however, have often been driven by striving for excellence, or perfection (which protect the parts of me that fear they are not enough, or not good enough, as they are); by believing I know what I need (and, often, what a congregation I'm serving needs as well); and by my tendency to advocate for particular outcomes, rather than attending to what *is* and what wants to emerge.

It so happens that these strategies, which I have mistakenly tended to read through an individualistic, psychological lens, are traits of what has come to be known as “white supremacy culture.”

In *Recovering the Sacred Center*, Presbyterian pastor and founder of the Parish Empowerment Network, Howard E. Friend, Jr. describes how one relinquishes the false self in favor of the true self, in “The Three-Fold Journey to Renewal,” as adapted from the teaching of Thomas Merton by Sister Sharon Doyle:

1. Letting go of the false self, the persona, the mask, the personality we have so carefully crafted, knowing it is not the person God had in mind at our creation, and acknowledging that we have lost our way and cannot find our way back as an act of will.
2. Falling downward into God, where we rediscover the true self, recover our sacred center, reclaim our “true name,” our “self, hidden within God in Christ,”
3. Emerging outward toward living a life more faithful to our truer self, never perfectly or completely, but daily retracing this journey to and through and from our sacred center.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Beaumont, "Leading in a Liminal Season".

⁶¹ Howard E. Friend, *Recovering the Sacred Center: Church Renewal from the Inside Out* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1998), 39.

The experience of the neutral zone or liminal space fosters the reemergence of the true self by bringing the false self to its knees. The loss of status and ability can lead to a reorientation of the self not as a separate individual, but as a self-in-relationship to other selves and to the transcendent mystery and wonder, often called “God,” by ushering in a humility and awareness of the self’s dependent nature. Unknowing, attending, and surrender are thus not only orientations of leadership with presence, they are hallmarks of the true self.

It is clear from these descriptions that the transformative journey of the liminal space is never easy, and it certainly wasn’t for me. As I’ve said, I only surrendered to it when forced by pain and disability to do so.

Perhaps it is more than mere coincidence that the pain began shortly after a 3-week visit with my family where I had neglected my daily practices, and found myself so triggered or activated that I completely lost my bearings and my self-image as a relatively healthy, spiritually-grounded person. Perhaps it is more than mere coincidence that the pain began just at the time when I needed to make important decisions about searching for a new ministry position. These were decisions that would be pivotal to my long-term future in ministry and ought not be made from a false or divided self.

The Ego Bows to the Heart

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, ministry positions generally begin in August, and ministers seeking settled positions declare their interest the preceding winter. Unitarian Universalists practice congregational polity; each congregation is self-governing and financially self-supporting. Our Association of Congregations provides logistical support for the search and settlement process, but ministry positions are ultimately filled by mutual discernment and

agreement between minister and congregation. Once vacant settled ministry positions are filled, and it becomes clear which congregations will need Interim Ministers, there is a very quick cycle where those positions are filled, again through mutual discernment and agreement between minister and congregation.

The time had come when I needed to decide whether to seek a settled position or return to interim ministry. The truth is that, although I was increasingly sensing that I wanted to remain in western Washington, where I'd lived for four years, I had also long nurtured the hope that I might return as Interim Minister to my home congregation in Madison, Wisconsin, where I'd lived for nearly twenty years. With a membership of approximately 1400 adults and 500 children, First Unitarian Society-Madison is one of the largest Unitarian Universalist congregations in the world, which means that it requires a substantially different style of ministerial leadership than what I'd needed in my interim ministries. I'd prepared myself for large church ministry through seminary courses and workshops on Large Church ministry and had a year of informal mentoring by a minister in a large congregation and believed that I would ultimately end up serving our large congregations.

The senior minister of my home congregation was now about to retire, and I had to decide whether to forgo the search for a settled position and the possibility of staying in western Washington in order to be available for the interim position in Madison, should the search committee and I discern that we'd be a good fit for the interim period and all it entails.

In the weeks prior, as the time for this decision approached, my uncertainty about the position in Madison revealed itself as fear and insecurity in my meditations, even as the possibility of small church ministry began to suggest itself to me.

Rereading my journals during that time, I came across the quote from Joseph Campbell I'd noted from professional days: "You must give up the life you planned in order to live the life that is waiting for you."⁶²

I noted it again in my journal, followed by this entry:

The life I planned has me going back to Madison, to First Unitarian Society, to the church about which a friend recently posted on Facebook: "Some of my fellow FUS members would say that they never go to church, if asked. They wouldn't think of FUS as a church."⁶³

I felt a bit of fear as I read that comment. Like, oh, yeah, and I was part of that when I was there. Now I am seeking to be more spiritual, more religious. Who was I then? And how did I change?

What could discernment look like for me?

Should I go to Madison or not?

It's so interesting that all along I've had First Unitarian Society in mind, and I've also been drawn to the unique, small congregations...

Probably mostly because they love me – less because I love them.

I already have admirers, people who see me as their minister.

...

I was thinking [about how people might respond to me wearing my] black robe at First Unitarian Society? Wondering if part of why I loved it (its humanist bent) would be difficult for me now. If it would work against me, against my spiritual/emotional health.

⁶² For a discussion of the origins of this quote, see Garson O'Toole, "We Must Be Willing to Get Rid of the Life We've Planned, So As To Have the Life That Is Waiting for Us," *Quote Investigator* (blog), May 21, 2017, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/05/21/life-plan/>.

⁶³ Elizabeth Barrett, Facebook, January 2, 2018.

Then I thought of a colleague's trickster God, Coyote, and how I might need to find other ways to share my God with them, other ways to help them – to point them toward a sustaining, loving something/someone. I don't know.

I fear I have moved into a Christian realm where I won't be nourished spiritually by my experiences in a UU context.

Two preaching gigs coming up.

What to offer?

What to listen to?

How to surface my feelings and see what role they're playing for me?

What congregation do I want to serve? What congregation am I *called* to serve?

Who will benefit from my ministry? Where will I do good work?

Where will I have the satisfaction of doing good work?

To what ministry can I bring my whole self?

Where will the spirit of life most fully flow in and through me?

Where is my best hope to be compassionate, to feel and to offer God's love and grace? (January 6, 2018)

After writing the above, I did the Compassion Practice with a Difficult Emotion. The following journal entry describes what I experienced:

The tightness in my solar plexus as I leave my body and let my thoughts drag me around – the fear that [my sister] won't love me if I can't be what she needs me to be, which is so similar to what I experienced with mom.

I was the child who was loved because she did (or didn't) do what all the others did. I felt the cost of being the favored, the beloved one, and how I still nevertheless want that – how my ego gets hooked: I want people to admire me, and I imagine it's all or nothing.

"Thank God I disappointed you, Emily," Fred responded when we talked in Nov. and I told him I'd realized that I'd wanted him to be God, and then said he'd failed me! I said it playfully. It was easy. He laughed. His response was easy.

And in my meditation, I am seeing God, reaching out to me, inviting me to a playful dance. Not rocking the child who's afraid she won't be loved, and who's working so hard to be perfect, to be the best, but inviting her/me, to dance. (January 6, 2018)

I am reminded of Henri Nouwen's notion of the "ministry of absence". Nouwen deeply valued the ministry of presence, of being with people in pain; he also understood that a pastoral caregiver needed to leave room for a suffering person to connect directly with God. Of course, Fred had to fail to be God if I were to connect directly with God, or the infinite source of compassion.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, I worried about failing others:

I'm worried about my upcoming preaching gigs. Worried I won't find the – well, the best I can do. Worried that they won't admire me, love me, see me as a wonderful source of wisdom, love, grace, all the things I want to be.

Jesus was tired sometimes.

He withdrew for prayer.

⁶⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), Kindle Loc. 431.

I find it hard to withdraw for prayer.

For meditation, for connection to God, to the source I am not.

I play God.

God, let me fail them, and let me fail to quell my fear by fighting my fall – let me float into the love that holds me, the love in which I can truly rest.

Rest in love.

I wrote “Rest in Love” about resting in my relationship with Fred, about Mary Ann’s loving suggestion that I not bring that relationship to a close too early – prematurely.⁶⁵

I now think I need to rest in the gracious, expansive love of God.

I need to make that my home base.

My brain is not my home base.

My competence is not my home base.

I always used to say: “The intellect in service of the heart.”

I worry that First Unitarian Society – my fears center on whether I’ll be able to preach what they need. Whether I’m good enough. (January 6, 2018)

A few weeks later, I was struck by the longing evoked in me by these words from the introduction to Epperly and Epperly’s *Feed the Fire! Avoiding Clergy Burnout*:

We are also grateful to our congregation, Disciples United Community Church, a progressive open and affirming congregation, whose free spirit has encouraged us to

⁶⁵ Emily Melcher, "Love's Midwife/Rest in Love," track 10 on *Breathe Me Open*, CD (Madison, WI: EAMTG4, 2004). Lyrics and audio available at <https://www.emilymelcher.com/cds/breathe-me-open>.

express ourselves theologically and spiritually without apology and has enabled us to be our best in the practice of ministry.”⁶⁶

In response, I was able to claim for myself that “I don’t want to love God in the shadows...” (February 13, 2018)

Recognizing that large congregations often have professional music staff, I explicitly wondered whether I’d have to relegate my singing to the shadows if I served one:

I fear, if I serve a large church, that there won’t be room for my music. And that breaks my heart.

[I’m reminded of] the message that “The minister shouldn’t sing.” “The soul is shy,” writes Parker Palmer in *A Hidden Wholeness*.⁶⁷ My music is so close to my soul. I claim it as central to my ministry. And yet I allow it to be overshadowed, shoved aside...

As I sang and played today, I felt so much physical discomfort: pain in my wrist, my torso, difficulty breathing deeply. The pain of my instrument [my body] being in disrepair, and the sadness/suffering on top of that, that 1) I have contributed to the disrepair, and 2) that it is so.

How will I beckon my shy soul forward again? (January 23, 2018)

The next day, I copied a quote from Richard Rohr into my journal: “We need to deeply trust and allow both our own dyings and our own certain resurrections...”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Epperly and Epperly, *Feed the Fire! Avoiding Clergy Burnout*, viii.

⁶⁷ Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 57.

⁶⁸ Richard Rohr, “The Mystery of Suffering,” *Center for Action and Contemplation* (blog), January 24, 2018, <https://cac.org/the-mystery-of-suffering-2018-01-24/>.

“I feel a letting go”, I wrote later:

I feel a letting go

at the same time

as I try to articulate

what I want

what I’m doing

maybe I haven’t let go yet

my ego is still in charge,

wanting, wanting,

I don’t know

Madison in my every thought – rumbling around in my head.

I don’t want to lose it as a beloved home. I want to go there because it’s a place that holds me, heals me, a place where I belong. (January 24, 2019)

The reality was beginning to surface in my awareness that my longing for Madison had more to do with wanting to return to the nurturing home and community it was for me during a crucial period of my development, than with a clear calling to ministry there.

At the same time, my pain and disability were rapidly increasing. Soon the pain was so severe that it regularly intruded in every facet of my life. There was no more business as usual. There was no possibility of barreling through anything whatsoever. It might be accurate to say that I had been here before, though with psychological pain the previous time, and I had a modicum of faith that all would be well.

I have been a small ball of pain, wrapped inside myself as if any touch would hurt – because I hurt so much. I'd like to come out of it, to find my way out of the pain. (February 22, 2018)

Sometimes, all I could do was sit immobile, wrapped in a blanket with bags of frozen peas on my shoulders, arms and wrists. When I was able to stay awake for a meditation, I often found it brought temporary relief from the pain, along with a deep sense of relaxation and peace.

What emerged more and more was access to the most tender of feelings: grief about my own limitations; connection to the human condition, and humility. I spent a lot of time crying and moving very slowly through my days. For the first time in my life, I had a visceral understanding of what people with debilitating illness experience. That awareness softened me.

In the midst of the pain, I asked the universe for a new song. What emerged was a simple prayer, just four lines, which I sang over and over when the pain felt unbearable. The resonance of the song, and the hope and faith it embodied, soothed me:

Light of lights, heal me
Breath of life, fill me
Hope of hopes, restore my spirit
Love flow through me (See Appendix 3 for melody)⁶⁹

As my pain increased, my sense of being held by a universal source of compassion deepened, as did my use of explicitly theological language. “I’m especially fond of you,” God says to the man who’s hurting in the movie, “The Shack.” She says it to him several times as he journeys through his dark night of the soul. Eventually he realizes that the nature of God is to love impartially, and without limit.⁷⁰ That was the god I was becoming increasingly aware of.

⁶⁹ Emily Melcher, "Prayer for Healing," 2018. Not recorded. Melody line available in Appendix 2.

⁷⁰ Stuart Hazeldine, dir, *The Shack* (based on the book of the same title by William P. Young). 2017: Summit Entertainment. DVD, Drama/Fantasy.

One day when I did the Compassion Practice Meditation on a Sacred Moment, the experience that surfaced and became the focus of my meditation was of “the sacred, holy experience of writing ‘Invitation to little em’,” a song in which my adult self-acknowledged and welcomed the whole of my inner child, mirroring and loving her.⁷¹ That day’s meditation from Richard Rohr spoke of God’s mirroring of us, like a good parent.⁷² I remembered that when I wrote “Invitation to little em,” I was in therapy. My therapist was mirroring me, simultaneously modeling and teaching me to mirror my inner child. In my journal, I wrote:

And the thing is – it’s not past.

But it may look different now – as I try to find my way with a different body and set of possibilities.

The World felt open then – all hope was in bloom and I saw so much ahead. In the past few days, the fear of rheumatoid arthritis has loomed large as has the pain in my joints, the excruciating pain of holding a pen or sitting at the keyboard. The fear that I may never again hold my guitar.

And the marriage of voice and accompaniment, of free movement and song – they may be gone forever.

--except (I hear a voice singing)

--except in my heart and psyche, and those will still be able to shine. (February 26, 2018)

Of course, it wasn’t that simple. A few days later, I wrote:

Argh! So much pain.

⁷¹ Emily Melcher, "Invitation to little em," Track 6 on *All Here!* CD (Madison, Wisconsin: EAMTG, 2002). Lyrics and audio available at <https://www.emilymelcher.com/cds/all-here>.

⁷² Rohr, *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent*, Monday of the Second Week of Lent, Kindle.

I did a meditation on welcoming presence and saw fear like a little child. Fear that I will never be well. Fear that I won't be able to work.

I saw shame about being so needy and so incapacitated. I thought of the fact that this is a real learning experience for me. That it's humbling. That I'm guest preaching on Sunday about the movie "City of Joy", and one of the things I thought I would lift up this time, for the first time, is how the protagonist, a white male American surgeon, has to learn that we are not in fact independent as human beings, and that the place he learns that is in the slum where no one has ever been able to make it on their own.

[The colleague who serves the congregation where I'm preaching] invited us to stay in his cohousing on Saturday night and to have lunch with him after church on Sunday. He noted that working half time allows him to spend time with colleagues and said how special that is. What struck me in that moment is that I may have to make a different choice around my ministry, and that there might be a real blessing in finding a part-time ministry position that would allow me to keep my pace slower, to tend to my health.

I also know that if I can get this pain under control I will have a lot more energy and capacity to do things I want to do, and even things I don't want to do. So now I think the first step is to recognize that this pain has rendered me hopeless and that the next step has to be getting adequate pain control. I recognize how much of my thinking about the immediate future and the long-term future is governed right now by the way this pain is incapacitating me. (February 28, 2018)

Two days later, a meditation from Richard Rohr evoked this response:

I love Richard Rohr's heading for today's Lenten lectionary reading:

"Don't be too afraid of being thrown into the pit.

I know that any kind of defeat or humiliation is not the American way, but it is surely the biblical way. There the pattern is rather clear, and there is no going up until you go down."⁷³

The compassion practice: Beholding a beloved other. Focus today was on me as a beloved other, when I'm feeling sick. I have a sense that some of the fear and grief that I'm experiencing now as a result of this pain is back-loaded with my experience of getting diabetes, and how difficult it was for me to accept love and care from anyone. I simply didn't know how. I feared my own vulnerability. I wanted love and care but didn't know how to see it. Thinking of something I read in a recent journal from Richard Rohr about how we can only pray for things that we have a sense of or an inkling of or that are already somehow there for us, and that prayer itself connects with those things, or something like that. The point today is that it's only because I feel worthy of love and care that I'm willing and able to desire it and ask for it. I think of my visit to the physical therapist the other day and how in the morning before I went there...I anticipated being cared for in the physical therapy session. And that's exactly what happened. At the end of the session, when she asked if I had any more questions for her, I was quiet for a few seconds, and then I said "not right now. I'm just really sad. "And I let my grief show in the tears that welled up in my eyes. She looked at me and said, "of course you are." It was just a quiet acknowledgment between a patient and her caregiver of how difficult this is. I don't think that back when I got diabetes I could've said anything like that, although I was terribly sad. And in these past few days I have really allowed myself to be honest about

⁷³ Richard Rohr, *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent*, Friday of the Second Week of Lent, Kindle.

how I'm feeling, and to be congruent when I'm talking with other people, trusting that they care, and letting them in.

'Don't be too afraid to be thrown into the pit.'

...

I do not need to be able bodied to be worthy of love and care, but I need to want love and care enough and feel worthy enough to receive it.

I do not need to be the minister of a large church to practice meaningful ministry. God does not ask that of me, God asks that I evolve and change and that I practice ministry in whatever situation I find myself.

"Do not be too afraid to be thrown into the pit." (March 2, 2018)

The next day, I was the guest preacher at the small congregation on Whidbey Island, WA, where the colleague who'd mentioned that having time to spend with colleagues was one of the joys of half-time ministry, was about to retire from his position. I preached about the film "City of Joy" and its message that, in that squalid slum known as the City of Joy, the gifts of every person were needed and received for the good of all. The film follows a young, white, male American surgeon who travels to India to escape his despair when a young patient dies on his operating table. He ends up finding himself, and his purpose and meaning, in living and sharing everything with the people of the City of Joy.

There's an epigram at the end of the movie: "All that is not given is lost." Years ago, I used that line in a song I wrote about my home congregation. When I preached on Whidbey Island, I sat at their magnificent piano and played and sang that song.

All That Is Not Given Is Lost⁷⁴

All of us are stewards of the gifts we each possess.
Each gift that is given benefits the rest.
Many have been here before us;
There are many who follow behind.
Each one who's nurtured here nurtures another,
and so we are all intertwined.
May we open our hearts to receive,
for only an open heart gives.
What we clutch in our fearfulness withers and dies;
What we offer in gratitude lives.
And a hand and a heart that are open aren't weighing the cost.
All that is not given is lost.
A hand and a heart that are open aren't weighing the cost.
All that is not given is lost.
All that is not given is lost.

By the time I left the church that day, I had fallen in love.

⁷⁴ Emily Melcher, "All That Is Not Given Is Lost," 2004. Not recorded.

Chapter 6: Emerging

Simple Mind

“My grandmother used to say life was so much easier when you were simple-minded.

It’s taken me almost my whole life to understand what she meant.”⁷⁵

A week later, prompted by a meditation from Richard Rohr’s *Lenten Encounters*; Process Theology’s creative-responsive love; and my experiences with the Compassion Practice, I wrote in my journal:

God’s love is one. It cannot be otherwise. That’s why God in “The Shack” is able to say with complete sincerity, “I’m especially fond of you,” and to say it to every person. God’s love is simply one, it is simply whole, never partial. It does not need to be divided between people. (March 9, 2018)

I was moved to write this prayer:

Loving God, you who see me and know me, gaze upon me with love. Teach me how to love myself as you love me. Help me want for myself that which will allow me to be in service to your calling to me for as long as possible. Help me to attend to your aims for my life, for searching for my own desires is not an adequate means of discovering what I should give myself to next. Comfort me in my pain, quiet my worried mind and my fearful heart, that I might better listen for your voice within my own soul. Amen.

(March 9, 2018)

⁷⁵ Brian Andreas, "Simple Mind," *Still Mostly True, Collected Stories & Drawings of Brian Andreas* (Decorah, IA: StoryPeople, 1994).

Then, I did the Compassion Practice's meditation on "Welcoming Presence", and wrote about it:

The sacred space I found myself in was the sanctuary on Whidbey Island. I was in that beautiful sanctuary with the exquisite tapestries, the hand carved wooden doors, the magnificent piano. I could see out through the windows to the beautiful evergreens. I pictured off in the distance the Olympic Mountains, or perhaps they were the Cascades. No matter, what I sensed was how beautiful the Pacific Northwest is, and how much I long to make it my permanent home.

When guests started arriving in my meditation, the one that was immediately present and palpable was peace. I felt so much peace. I breathed in that peace, and felt how it flowed through me as I gazed out on the faces of those I met last Sunday. I knew, somehow, that this is a place I could feel at peace.

This is a place where I can cultivate love, collaboration, creativity, and health. I saw Madison, too, briefly. But what I saw there was my friends, being friends again, and myself feeling at home among them.

I sensed the joy and excitement building inside of me as I imagined myself letting go of the long-held dream of serving First Unitarian Society of Madison, and I rested in the sense of peacefulness that engulfed me. I felt the weight of my hands, the warmth in my legs, the breath flowing through me, and the willingness to let go, to surrender into the possibilities of the Whidbey Island congregation.

Two months later, I expressed interest in the open position at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island. I had finally, albeit tentatively, been diagnosed with

rheumatoid arthritis, and the medications were taking hold, though pain was still part of my daily experience. I felt confident that I would be able to manage a half-time position. One morning, I wrote in my journal:

In my morning meditation today-a meditation on welcoming presence-the first guest I saw or felt was planning. “Planning is here,” I said, noticing my busy mind thinking through the day ahead, thinking through the months ahead wondering how I will fill my time, thinking about my daily tasks, the projects I have imagined I would do if I had time, cooking for tomorrow, all of that sort of stuff. When invited to allow that guest to materialize and take some form, I immediately saw a busy squirrel, collecting nuts for the winter, storing up in this season what it needs for the next season, not frantic, but simply instinctive, just doing what a squirrel does naturally. I softened and felt a deep appreciation for the way a squirrel instinctively tends to the things it needs to tend to, without worrying.

And then I saw the baby squirrel lying under the birdfeeder outside our living room window in Wisconsin, the one that I worried might have fallen from a nest, the one I feared might be dead. I remembered walking outside, quietly approaching the birdfeeder, and seeing the little squirrel look up at me. Speaking a few gentle words to it I quietly wandered off to the cool concrete stoop outside our door. The little squirrel followed me. I sat down on the stoop, and the squirrel approached me, climbing over my feet. I didn't reach out to touch it, didn't seek to hold it there, nor to get it to leave. I just sat there quietly observing it. After some time, I got up and went inside, trusting it to the universe, to a mother squirrel I imagined was still around somewhere, and I never saw the squirrel again.

In the quiet of my meditative reflection, I found a peace. I recognized the squirrel's need to prepare and to plan and knew that the part of me that does that works toward my well-being. I also knew that inside that planning, industrious squirrel is a tiny, tender, curious being in which I can rest.

I felt myself rest into our home in Wisconsin, into the beauty of the outdoors there and how connected I felt to nature. I saw an image of myself, or it might be more correct to say that I felt myself again in Fred's office, simply in the safety and comfort that our relationship offered me.

By the end of my meditation, I had a real sense that all is well, and that all will be well. That I don't need to fill my time, that this is a time for integration for me and a time for inward reflection, and I felt a sense of peace knowing that when I have given myself to that in the past it has been rich and healing and generative and full of the love that I have forgotten to show myself and to live from in my ministry.

I thought this morning about the beauty of a part-time ministry and the fact that I have always preferred experiences of depth, and how interim ministry calls incessantly on the busy squirrel, leaving the other squirrel behind.

For so long, I looked outside myself for the course that would teach me what I needed to know, for the experience that would add something that I thought was missing. I think my new awareness that a sustaining and sustainable ministry is not additive but subtractive is so important.

I listened to a couple of my songs this morning, the two that followed directly after the welcoming meditation. The first was "The Whole of Me", and the second "You Will Find Your Way". I felt so connected to the beauty and the wisdom of those songs,

and recognized in them such an incredible gift of love, a gift I want to place at the center of my self-care and of my relationships to others. (May 2, 2019)

The Whole of Me

Reconnect the part of me
that knows just who I am.
Reconnect the heart of me,
that full-of-passion part of me.
Reconnect the soul of me,
the whole of me.⁷⁶

You Will Find Your Way

You still believe that I've dismantled your defenses,
but I've seen you take the bricks down one by one,
asking, "Can you still love me?"
and "Would you please hold me?"
learning not to hide and not to run.

I've seen you longing for more than just survival,
wondering how it feels to thrive
reaching out to let my love
caress those tender places
where your sadness helps you know that you're alive.

I have faith enough for both of us for now
I have seen a blossom burst forth from a bud
Felt the hardness in a heart grow soft in love,
and I believe that you will find your way somehow.

I have heard you weeping in your sleep.
Heard you cry out in fear in the night
I believe that something opens deep inside us when we dream
so I resist my urge to wake you from your fight.

And yet I'm with you, just as you've been with me
Loving me as I've learned to thrive
Keeping watch beside me
As I wrestled with my demons
Rejoicing with me when I came alive

⁷⁶ Emily Melcher, "The Whole of Me," track 1 on *All Here!*, CD (Madison, WI: EAMTG3, 2002). Lyrics and audio available at <https://www.emilymelcher.com/cds/all-here>.

So I have faith enough for both of us for now
I have seen a blossom burst forth from a bud
Felt the hardness in a heart grow soft in love,
and I believe that you will find your way somehow.

There are places we each must walk alone
There are lessons for which there is no guide
But I will love you as you travel on the journey that is yours
As you come to know the strength you have inside

I will be with you, just as you've been with me,
Loving you, as you learn to grow
Trusting and believing in you
Even when you falter
Rejoicing in all you come to know

I have faith enough for both of us for now
I have seen a blossom burst forth from a bud
Felt the hardness in a heart grow soft in love,
and I believe that you will find your way somehow.
You still believe that I've dismantled your defenses:
I believe that you are finding your way.⁷⁷

And finally, with clarity, I wrote these words:

I don't need to set the world on fire.

I don't need to save the world. I don't need a big, high-powered ministry.

I need to embody love in my living. (May 2, 2019)

⁷⁷ Emily Melcher, “You Will Find Your Way,” track 11 on *Breathe Me Open*, CD (Madison, WI: EAMTG4, 2004). Lyrics and audio available at <https://www.emilymelcher.com/cds/breathe-me-open/>.

Chapter 7: Ministering Anew

Imagining World

“In my dream, the angel shrugged & said, If we fail this time, it will be a failure of imagination
& then she placed the world gently in the palm of my hand.”⁷⁸

Two months later, I interviewed for the half-time ministry position with the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island. For the first time in my life, I went into an interview with a sense of unknowing, an intention to explore, and absolutely no need or desire to prove myself. I was simply present, my true self, in the interview. Before the interview was over, it was clear to both the search committee and me that we had found a match in one another.

Now, a year and a half later, our shared ministry is thriving, and I am confident that my practice of ministry is sustaining and sustainable.

In preparation for writing the final chapter of this project, I reviewed all my journals since the one that concludes the previous chapter. I was surprised to see how often I was triggered (or activated) by something happening in the congregation, but I could also see that the writing reliably led me back to the Compassion Practice, which enabled me to get grounded, find self-compassion and compassion for the other(s) who had activated my FLAGs, and to know that both they and I are held by an infinite source of compassion. The fact that this is a half-time position means that I have the time to process things in this way, which benefits both the congregation and me.

⁷⁸ Andreas, "Imagining World," *Still Mostly True, Collected Stories & Drawings of Brian Andreas* (Decorah, IA: StoryPeople, 1994).

When the congregation and/or I have been stuck, I've drawn on my process theological understanding of an ever-present, responsive love that wants the best for the impasse, which has helped me to rest in love, and to be attentive to the lures that love has already put before me and us.

Naturally, there are areas of challenge. The most challenging thing for me in this ministry is that my role is generally constrained to preaching and pastoral care, which means that my skills and gifts for operational leadership, so crucial to my role as an interim minister, are rarely utilized in this congregation where the laity have always held the operational leadership. To be sure, they do it quite well, *and* I believe some of the congregation's objectives would be better served if we broadened the scope of my ministry. I trust we will find our way, together. I have no doubt there's some ego or false self at play here, for I sometimes find myself striving or advocating for a broader leadership role, even though I'm not certain I want one! Indeed, although my ego took some pleasure in developing the necessary skills for operational leadership as an interim minister, it was often so consuming that sleep, study, spiritual practice, creativity and time with family got sidelined. I lost my connection to the sacred source of compassion that sustained and renewed me and fueled my ministry. I grew ill, got burned out.

Through this project, I have found renewal, deepened my spiritual practice, integrated my studies, clarified and strengthened my theology, and expressed myself creatively. I now spend a good amount of time relaxing with family, walking on the beach, and singing, and I only rarely lose sleep over ministry demands. I find, too, that this ministry not only sustains me, but helps me to grow, by welcoming, calling forth, and benefiting from my creativity, my worship leadership, and my preaching. I am constantly aware that this ministry is shaping and sustaining members of the congregation and me.

I am having the wondrous experience of a deep and loving connection with this congregation, sustained, on my side, by the compassion that flows into and through me. A few months ago, I journaled about the impact of a particular worship service on me:

Yesterday, a marvelous service about General Assembly. I led the singing, and I tapped into a well of love for these people. I tapped into my promise, my calling, to be a vessel of love for others - the love that heals.

And I changed my e-mail signature from "Warmly, Emily" to "Love, Emily". I don't always feel it, but the practice of writing it may remind me of the fact that I love them and that, regardless of how I feel in any given moment, I am here to be a vessel of God's love for them. I know that to separate myself from that flow is to damage them and me. "Warmly," it seems to me, expresses how I'm feeling about them, or names a quality in myself, but "love" is something I'm a conduit for, something I do not want to block. (August 5, 2019)

Love fill me,
Flow through me
To all the world.⁷⁹

Into the Future

It goes without saying that this project has been of critical importance in my life and ministry. I am well aware that the work of spiritual renewal is the ongoing vocation of a minister, beckoning me always toward greater compassion and understanding through study and practice.

In recent months, my practice of ministry has expanded beyond the particular congregational context in which I currently serve to mentoring students preparing for ministry and colleagues in their first few years of ministry. These aspiring and relatively new ministers

⁷⁹ Emily Melcher, "Flow Through Me," 2019. Not recorded.

are facing the same types of challenges that contributed to my burn-out, challenges common to new ministers. All of them are at risk of burn-out. In my role as mentor, I am able to bear credible witness to their struggles and help them practice attending to what's going on in their souls as they navigate the demands of their roles.

I also serve as a good officer to colleagues who are in pain or experiencing conflict in or with their congregations or other colleagues.

In both of these roles, I have the tremendous privilege not only of drawing on the learning and experience of this project, but of being a conduit for the love that holds all of us, seeks the best for every impasse, and lures us toward new life.

One of the co-directors of the UU Ministers Association has invited me into dialog about how this project might be shared our Association, and I will be exploring that in the coming months.

Another avenue for future exploration is in bringing the Compassion Practice to UU contexts.

In terms of future research, interviews with clergy who have stopped serving in ministry positions, or who have experienced negotiated resignations, could illuminate the scope of the problem and suggest useful interventions. Within Unitarian Universalism, we currently have only anecdotal evidence of clergy burn-out.

It has unfortunately been outside the scope of this project to delve more deeply into the impacts of white supremacy culture on expectations and outcomes in Unitarian Universalist ministry; Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is as an area ripe for further ethnographic or autoethnographic study. I recommend such study explore the similarities and differences in the experience of “white” clergy and indigenous and people of color clergy, not simply as a matter

of academic curiosity, but because it might support the kinds of cultural change that are necessary for our collective liberation.

It is my fervent hope that this study will serve as a source of inspiration for clergy (and other helping professionals) who are in need of spiritual renewal. I further that hope my humility, courage, self-awareness, and creativity will encourage others to liberate themselves and their congregations from anything and everything that does not support health in their ministries, and give them fortitude to work to dismantle the systems of oppression that harm us all.

Finally, I hope this project proves useful to clergy who are considering doctoral programs, by giving a perspective on CST's D. Min. in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership, even as CST may find it a useful witness to the goals of this particular D. Min. program, and an impetus to further clarify the expectations it carries.

Epilogue

Nothing More

“If there is any secret to this life I live, this is it: the sound of what cannot be seen sings within everything that can & there is nothing more to it than that.”⁸⁰

I close this project with this complete sermon, written a year or so into my ministry with the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island, as I was nearing the end of my D. Min. program at CST. It introduces the Compassion Practice as one path to addressing the myriad difficulties people face in their lifetimes, through the lens of one of my experiences. I include it here in order to show how one of the central struggles that shaped this project narrative becomes a gift for my ministry to others.

Rest in Love⁸¹

These days, it seems as if fear is a frequent visitor, if not a constant companion, for so many of us, and the last thing we want to do is meet it at the door laughing...

- When we find ourselves on our way to the hospital, sitting in a waiting room, or lying in a hospital bed

⁸⁰ Andreas, "Nothing More," *Traveling Light: Stories and Drawings For a Quiet Mind*, Kindle Loc. 89.

⁸¹ Emily Melcher, "Rest in Love," Originally Titled "Holding the Tension," sermon (Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island, June 9, 2019).

- When we learn we are ill, or a loved one is newly diagnosed, and this time, it may be bad
- When we retire from a job that has been the center of our days, if not our lives, or lose a job, whether we liked it or not, or when we start a new job
- When we face the end of a relationship or the loss of a loved one who has been a source of love in our lives
- When someone new enters our lives, when a child or grandchild is born, and fear for their future goes hand in hand with joy at their existence
- When we send our children off into the world, knowing that we cannot ensure they will thrive, or even survive
- When we wake up and are startled to remember that we don't need to get up to walk the dog, because the dog is no longer with us
- When we or our loved ones are in the iron grip of addiction, and we discover there are things we cannot change
- When we uproot ourselves, moving from one home to another, or one community to another
- When we return home after a time away, and things aren't as we remembered them, and no one thinks to clue us in
- When the news of the world around us, and the perils facing the planet threaten our capacity to sustain hope and remain engaged

...when what is happening to us or around us is “a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep our house clean”⁸², the distance between fear and despair can be perilously small. When there’s so much that’s beyond our control that we feel helpless and hopeless, our only choice may be to surrender to what is, and to rest in love.

Now, resting in love is not the same thing as giving up. It’s not a surrender into helplessness and existential despair; it’s a way of tending our souls that ultimately renews us and allows us to discern wise and compassionate action where the way previously seemed closed.

As some of you know, I’m enrolled in a Doctoral program, pursuing a Doctorate of Ministry in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership. This is a professional degree, rather than a strictly academic one, and I entered into it when I recognized my own desperate need for spiritual renewal.

At the heart of this program is the practice of compassion, through which practitioners (or students) cultivate a connection to a sacred or cosmic source of compassion, nurture self-compassion, and develop their compassion for others and the world. The methodology includes an integrated set of meditations that draw on spiritual practice from many religious traditions, as well as Internal Family Systems Theory and Non-Violent Communication.

One of the meditations I regularly use is a practice of Welcoming Presence. That’s p-r-e-s-e-n-c-e, not p-r-e-s-e-n-t-s. This meditation cultivates a welcoming stance toward whatever arises within us. It deepens awareness of and compassion for one’s own thoughts,

⁸² Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, "The Guest House," *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1995), 109. This poem was used as a reading before the sermon.

feelings, and impulses, which increases one's capacity to observe and learn from them, rather than unconsciously being governed by them. It can be used as a regular practice, a way to discover what's stirring within, or as way to tend to something inside that's activated – or to use a more common phrase – when we're triggered.

Anyone who has ruminated or gotten swept up in the stories they tell themselves about themselves or others has been “had” by their thoughts; anyone who’s acted out in confusion or anger has been “had” by their feelings; anyone who’s reached for a bottle or a doughnut to quiet their anxiety knows the experience of being “had” by their impulses.

In this and other meditations in the Compassion Practice, we learn to have our thoughts, feelings, and impulses, rather than being had by them. You might say we learn to hold the tension, rather than acting on it. But it goes beyond simply holding the tension, for this practice teaches us to listen for the cry of fear, or longing, the aching wound, or the repressed gift that longs to be given – whatever it is that is activated within us, and fuels our thoughts, feelings, and impulses – and to compassionately tend to the source of that activation, which in turn enables us to discern a more grounded and compassionate way forward.

From the outset, this particular meditation put me in mind of Rumi’s poem “The Guest House”:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house

empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for who ever comes
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.⁸³

I've been practicing compassion in this way for well over two years, and it has, indeed, been spiritually renewing for me, and enhanced my relationships and my practice of ministry.

Nevertheless, I was reminded in quite a painful way, of why this is called a practice, and not a destination or an achievement, when I found myself overcome by rage a year and a half ago.

In the course of just a few weeks, I'd become functionally disabled: I couldn't hold a book, write in my journal, type on my keyboard, lift a plate down from a shelf or carry it into the dining room. I sometimes needed help drying myself after a shower, or had to dry myself with washcloths, which were light enough for me to hold. I frequently needed help getting dressed or undressed.

During the weeks of waiting for an appointment with a rheumatologist, weeks in which my condition steadily grew worse, my spouse, Anders, took on caring for me and picked up my share of the work in our home, in addition to his share and his full-time job.

⁸³ Rūmī, "The Guest House," 109.

And three times, one or another of my sisters flew in and stayed with us for a while to help me and give Anders respite and moral support.

One day, when my older sister, Marybeth, who is both a nurse and an interfaith chaplain, and who has been disabled herself for a number of years, was visiting, we all went to the grocery store together. I selected two beautiful, perfect, fragrant yellow Bartlett pears, and carefully put them in a bag, which I couldn't carry. I asked my sister to carry it, and didn't see the pears again until later that afternoon, when I caught sight of them on the counter, bruised and scraped from their encounter in that bag.

Suddenly I was overcome with rage. I picked up those pears and threw them with every ounce of strength I could muster, straight at the floor. When that failed to obliterate them, I marched over and stomped on each one, until they were splattered all over, unrecognizable, beyond repair.

The next thing to overcome me was shame, and self-recrimination. How could I do that? How could I rage like that over something as insignificant as bruised pears? How could I subject my spouse and my sister to that rage? Aren't I a minister?

Marybeth quietly got up and started cleaning up the mess, and I left the room with all of that swirling inside of me.

I was stunned. I'd been tending to my grief and fear all along, and thought I was handling this new situation with a modicum of equanimity. But I'd failed to notice how angry my helplessness made me, and so it made itself spectacularly evident, and I had to recognize it: I was angry at all I was losing. Because I'd failed to recognize and tend to that anger, because I'd failed to have it, it had me. And Marybeth. And Anders.

When I came back into the room some time later, the floor was clean, and I found a note from Marybeth. In the tiniest print, it said:

Afraid.

Hiding.

In my family, some of us learned to rage, and others to hide. Fight or flee. We don't tend to freeze. Marybeth lived for years in an abusive relationship, and rage in others naturally triggers her fear and her flight. I know this, but I had nevertheless been unable to control my rage.

Now I texted her: I understand.

And a bit later: It's safe now.

She replied: May I come up?

Yes, I texted back.

When Marybeth opened the door from the basement guest suite, she looked lovingly at me, sitting quietly on the couch, my heart heavy with grief and shame that I had raged and scared her. As she walked into the room, my sister gently asked:

Could I rub your arms with coconut oil?

Then she sat next to me on the couch, and with the gentlest of hands, and the lightest touch, she rubbed my aching, swollen arms. Rubbed love and compassion into me with each gentle stroke.

It was paradoxically exquisite and excruciating to receive that love, to rest in it, to take it in, to allow that compassion in that moment.

And I can't help thinking how odd it is that I didn't discern until I was writing this sermon a few days ago, that the rage was likely not really about anger at all I was losing – at

least not only that: for it seems to me now that it was also a cover for fear, which rage so often is.

I was afraid of becoming dependent, even as I was steadily practicing asking for help: Please help me dry myself, because today I can't hold the towel. Please help me put on my shirt, because I can't lift my arms. Please bring me my bags of frozen peas to ice my shoulders and arms, please open the car door for me. Please carry my purse. Please give me your arm; I'm having trouble balancing. Please help me walk up the stairs...and underneath each loss, each thing I for which I learned to ask for help, lay the fear that I would ultimately be as unrecognizable and beyond repair as those two Bartlett pears.

I was afraid I would become utterly vulnerable, and there would be no one there...OR that I would become utterly vulnerable, and there would be someone there, and I'd have to learn to rest in love once again.

In that moment, when I couldn't hold or tend my own feelings, Marybeth could. And as she gently, tenderly anointed my swollen and aching arms with coconut oil, she gave me the blessing of compassion, reminding me that I am worthy of compassion in every moment, even when my behavior doesn't invite it, even when I can't hold myself in compassion.

Marybeth tapped into that transcendent source of compassion I often know well, let it flow through her, and offered it to me.

And I received it, and was renewed.

Resting in love – it's not about holding the tension, it's about how we hold ourselves in the midst of the tension – or how we allow ourselves to be held.

Every one of us needs to find ways to rest in love.

Perhaps you, like Wendell Berry, go “and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds,” or otherwise tend your soul in the peace of “wild things who do not tax themselves with forethought of grief”?⁸⁴

A woman I know manages to live that way. When she was going through several bouts of cancer, with all the uncertainty and rounds of treatment that entailed, I asked her how she was dealing with it all. She said “I don’t tend to borrow trouble from the future.” That approach enabled her to take each thing as it came, with equanimity, and to retain her positive outlook throughout.

Some of you, I know, come into the peace of an embodied awareness of a love within and beyond us that holds us in our fear and despair, and makes a way out of no way.

Perhaps you know that love as a universal source of compassion; perhaps you know it in the compassion that shines in the faces of your companions, the kindness they show you.

When despair for the world grows in *you*, and you “wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what [your] life and [your] children’s lives may be”,⁸⁵ when “a crowd of sorrows violently sweep[s] your house clean...”⁸⁶ don’t fight it or flee it, don’t give up in despair!

Take it for what it is: an opportunity for you to practice opening into compassion, an invitation to rest in whatever source of compassion and love you know until your soul is renewed.

⁸⁴ Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things,” *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 30. This poem was used as a reading before the sermon.

⁸⁵ Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things,” 30.

⁸⁶ Rumi, “The Guest House,” 109.

Appendix 1: I Rest In You

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I Rest In You

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Emily Melcher

I rest in you rest - ing in me.
I rest in you
rest - ing in me.

Appendix 2: Prayer for Healing

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PRAYER FOR HEALING

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Emily Melcher

Rhythmically free

Light of lights, heal me. Breath of life, fill me.
Hope of hopes re-store my spirit, love, flow through me.

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